

Hearts Stolen



CARYL
McADOO

A Texas Romance

Five Star Reviews of previous title

Vow Unbroken by Caryl McAdoo

With an intriguing plot line and well-developed characters, McAdoo, who's written nonfiction and children's fiction, delivers an engaging read for her first adult historical romance.
--*Publishers Weekly*

After reading Caryl McAdoo's story of Henry and Susannah in "VOW UNBROKEN," I felt like I'd had another adventure with Tom Sawyer and Becky, this time as young adults. --
Alan Daugherty: columnist *The News-Banner*

Caryl McAdoo is a new unique voice in historical Christian fiction. I fell in love with the characters from the very first page. They pulled me into their lives and kept me there through the whole interesting storyline. I found the setting authentic, and Caryl kept me turning pages. I know you'll love this book as well as I did.

--Lena Nelson Dooley, award winning, best-selling author

Of *Maggie's Journey*, *Mary's Blessing*, *Catherine's Pursuit* & many more novels

Loved this story! Fresh strong voice from Caryl McAdoo...most memorable character [heroine Sue Baylor] I've encountered in some time. Well plotted and nicely paced. There's a Louis L'Amour and All-American feel to Caryl's writing. Beautiful romance, one of the nicest I've seen in a while.

--Carrie Fancett Pagels, author

Return to Shirley Plantation, a Civil War romance

A Really "Wow" Debut Novel! I loved this book--fast paced, adventurous, and satisfyingly wholesome. Oh, you are going to love this book.

--Anne Baxter Campbell, author
The Truth Trilogy: The Roman's Quest, Marcus Varitor, Centurion, and What Is Truth

Five Star Reviews ...continued

Caryl McAdoo's fiction hooks fast and reads like a seasoned author's historical adventure. I soon felt intricate participation with the pieced family group. Fast paced story... typical of rugged pioneer struggle in Mexican Texas era... with period jargon, scenery, and historical facts... complete with spiritual bliss and a rainbow's end. Christian Romantic Historical Adventure Fiction--a BIG genre for a whole lot of novel for all ages, men and girls.

-- Howard "Doc" Wolfe, top Amazon reviewer

Outstanding! Caryl did an excellent job of creating flawed but endearing characters—even Blue Dog—who steal your heart. It lifts your soul and sticks with you long after you turn the last page. Can't wait to read the next book! I hope she's a fast writer because I want more! *Vow Unbroken* taps into every human emotion in the characters and in the reader. Simply one of the best!

-- Holly Michael, author

Crooked Lines

Caryl McAdoo has penned a beautifully flowing story... a wonderful tale that will find its way into your heart. You couldn't ask for more endearing characters. Caryl's sweet storytelling made me feel like I was enjoying this adventure up close and personal, and by the time I finished, I felt like a part of this precious family! ...a truly satisfying read! -- Teresa Matthews, *Overcoming With God* (blog)

Vow Unbroken is a delightful historical fiction novel with clean romance of life in the 1800's. Ms. McAdoo does a splendid job of developing the characters you really can care about and putting together an interesting plot with excellent pacing. I loved this truth in this book.

-- Kathryn Svendsen, reviewer

Shelf Full of Books (blog)

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This book is a work of fiction. Any references to historical events, real people, or real places are used fictitiously. Other names, places, characters, and events are products of the author's imaginations, and any resemblance to actual events or places or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Dedication

Without my dearest and most beloved best friend, my high school sweetheart and husband of forty-six years, his inspiration, support, and encouragement, this story would never have been. Ron McAdoo stole my heart—well, I gave it to him—when we were sweet sixteen. This kind and patient man always seeks out the good and positive and whenever possible, disregards the bad and negative.

His example of living a Christ-like life ever before me has made me a better woman and challenged me always to grow closer to God. Lest I infer that he is perfect, let me assure you, he is not, but through my eyes of love, he does come close—most of the time.

Sweetheart, thank you for choosing me; I love you more today than yesterday, but less than tomorrow.

And to Daddy, a voracious reader who asked for this manuscript concerned he might not be here on its release date. He did get to read it just before his retina detached. So surprised his firstborn could write a story that held his attention so utterly, he told me, “I can’t say this is twice as good as book one, but it’s close!” I’m so glad he enjoyed it before his home going on July 31, 2014. I’m glad you were my father, Daddy!

Acknowledgements

Only One deserves all the glory for anything I accomplish, my Abba who loves me so. He never ceases to amaze me, constantly showering me with His favor and grace, knowing ahead of time what I need and providing it. Every person below; God brought them into my life. Words aren't enough to express how I'm blessed by their love and help.

I thank my husband. I already gushed over him in the Dedication, but if y'all only knew him, how he treats me, you'd know why I do. I promise, without Ron, I couldn't write the stories for you all to enjoy!

Thank you, Kirk DouPonce of DogEared Design for creating my beautiful cover. So great knowing you're a gifted Christian led by God, too. And you, Lee Carver! Thank you for helping me get it together.

Authors need a few special volunteers to read the manuscript and help catch mistakes: typos, missing articles (a, the, by, for), wrong words, transpositions, echo words or phrases used to often. The writer knows what it's supposed to say and reads right over too many uh-ohs. These ladies' help... Well, my heart swells with appreciation: Louise Koiner, Leah Jones, Holly Michael, Susan Karstan, and Telena Contreras.

During the throes of getting this book ready, I lost Daddy and my Uncle Jim a week apart—both eighty-five, and the last of their generation. I fell way behind editing. God sent Lenda Selph who tracked me down to proofread for me. What a divine appointment! Brought grateful tears. Oh, my, what a blessing you are, Lenda!

And everyone who leaves a review at Amazon and Goodreads, clicks 'Share' and 'Like' on Facebook, Tweets, and recommends my books to friends. I need y'all and thank y'all and know God will bless you for blessing me! My cup overflows!

“No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God *is* faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear *it*.”

1 Corinthians 10:13

Chapter

One

Just thinking about him made Sassy want to stick her tongue out like she used to do to her father when he ordered her around. But Charles had married her, and she promised to love, honor, and obey him.

She loved the man alright, leastwise she guessed she did. If he'd only treat her like a wife, not a child.... Of everyone, he should understand most that she was grown; coming on sixteen, as mature as she would ever get.

Rosaleen he'd called her. She hated her given name. Pshaw, she could do both, visit her mamma and have his ol' supper ready. As the sun peeked over the treetops, Sassy leaned forward and tickled the mare's ribs with her heels.

"Haw, pretty girl; we don't have all day. He said he'll be back by dark."

Stretching her gait, the mare flew over the rolling terrain. The wind whipped Sassy's hair behind her. Oh, how she loved riding, always had. In barely any time, she slowed the mare into a lope and topped the last hill before Kickapoo Creek.

That's where she always let Bliss get a sweet drink, but not too much, from the easy flowing stream. With only another eight miles to her folks' place, she might make it in time for some breakfast leftovers. She clicked her tongue.

Her mare cleared the far bank, then her snort and shiver shifted Sassy's attention to follow Bliss' gaze. Two bare-chested Indians sat on painted ponies. The bigger one pointed a long-handled club at her and whooped.

Sassy hammered her heels into the mare's ribs. The gray shot forward, hitting a full gallop in fewer than ten strides.

Calm, stay calm, but her heart beat like the nines. She'd never lost a race in her life, not on Bliss. She definitely couldn't lose this one. With a good lead, she'd outrun the little ponies.

But as much as she pressed the mare, Sassy didn't feel the horse giving the normal punch she counted on. Never should've run almost the whole way to the Kickapoo. Should have thought....

She glanced under her arm. They cut the butter. Closing in. Her

heart skipped. She tensed. Held her breath. Willed her horse to run faster. The reins slapped back and forth across Bliss' neck. Sassy bent low.

Where should she go? Was anyone nearer than her daddy?

The whoops behind her moved closer.

Everything happened in slow motion.

One of the Indians came even. He glanced over and smiled a sickening grin.

She couldn't breathe.

No, God, no.

His dark-skinned hand reached toward her mare's head. Sassy yanked Bliss the other way, but he grabbed the bridle. No, God. He reined his paint, squealing words Sassy didn't know.

Bliss matched the slower pace of the pony beside her.

Sassy swiped at his hand. "Let go! Get your hand off my horse!" She slapped his arm with the ends of her reins.

The second rode up on the opposite side and grabbed hold of her arm. He yanked his horse to a stop. Bliss ran right out from under Sassy. She went flying through the air screaming.

Gravity claimed its due, and she hit the ground. She stumbled then found her feet and ran. Her stupid petticoats and skirt tangled around her ankles. She tripped and ate a mouthful of black dirt.

The Indians laughed. She scrambled to her feet and faced them, spitting dirt, her fists balled. "Come on, you think you can take me."

They looked at one another and spoke strange words. One punched the other on the shoulder, grinning.

"Sure, go ahead. Have your fun. I'll show you."

They slid off their ponies. The smaller of the two started toward her, jumping out of reach each time she took a swing. The bigger one moved in closer.

Sassy jabbed hard with her left fist and caught him square on the jaw. "Haw! Teach you to mess with me." Didn't grow up with five brothers for nothing.

Reeling, he rubbed his face. The smaller boy laughed at him, slapping his belly with one hand, waving at the air with his other. Sore Jaw shouted angry words and pointed.

The other quit laughing. He looked at her and grinned that same sickening smile when he'd grabbed Bliss.

"Come on, you little coward. Scared of a girl?"

He stepped in fast. A swift kick to his gut doubled him over. Both his hands grabbed his middle. An upper cut caught his chin solid. Dazed him. She jabbed his nose with a left. Followed with a haymaker to his jaw. He stumbled back and to the side.

The big one laughed and pointed, obviously making great fun of

his friend.

Little Coward glared, bared his teeth and ran straight at her. Stepping sideways, she tripped on her torn bloomers. Hit her square and knocked her backwards. He landed on top, straddling her. She couldn't breathe, needed air. He held her arms down with his knees and spat in her face.

"Aaagghh. Get off me."

He hit her hard, harder than any of her brothers ever had. She bucked and bumped, rolled full circle out from beneath him, then away. Taking full advantage of his lost balance, she kicked him again. Scooted backwards on the ground, glaring.

The redskin would never make her cry.

He scrambled to his feet, leapt at her. Hit her again and again in the face, stomach, chest and arms. Sassy crumpled to the ground and curled up. He kicked her until the bigger one pulled him off.

His words sounded angry. Little Coward stood over her and spat on her face. She lay perfectly still. Her head pounded against her skull, like a busted watermelon, its red meat lying out in the sun.

Everything hurt.

Sore Jaw grabbed her hand and pulled her up and forward, but her feet offered no foundation. Her legs refused to hold her erect. He ducked one shoulder and threw her over it. Could her upside down view be a sign of her life now? Nothing would ever be right again.

Little Coward sneered.

Her arms dangled toward the ground swinging as her captor walked. He threw her over Bliss, her stomach across the saddle then tied her hands and feet to the stirrups.

Oh, dear Lord.

She should have listened to Charles.



Only after Swift Arrow crossed many creeks and the sun lay well below the horizon did he stop his march. Once he cut her loose and hobbled his new gray pony to graze, he relaxed, sat on his haunches, and chewed on a chunk of buffalo jerky.

In the last of the day's pale light, he studied the fiery-haired female as she lay on her side. He held out the dried meat, and though knowing she wouldn't understand the People's tongue, asked, "Hungry?"

She spit at him then rattled off strange words. Crazy woman. Even with her hands tied behind her back and her legs bound, she struggled against the leather straps.

Never had he seen or heard about a white woman fighting like

this one. Even now, her face ugly and swollen, both eyes blackened, she glared with hate.

Little Beaver stood. "I will kill her and eat her liver. The old ones will sing about this day for years."

Swift Arrow jumped to his feet. "She is worth many ponies. No one will kill the woman. I subdued her. She is mine."

"Ha. Only after I beat all the fight out of the white wild cat. You must share her price." His friend glared then held up two fingers. "No, three." He added a finger. "Bold Eagle will give his best horses for that fiery head."

"Agreed, but you will not touch one hair." He tossed the last bite of jerky at the white woman. It landed a hand's span away from her mouth. He faced his friend. "Rest now. The moon will show our way tonight. We cross the river before anyone knows she's gone."



Sassy wanted the piece of meat, but wasn't about to eat it off the dirt, or let that Indian think she would accept any crumb he had to offer. She wasn't sure exactly what Little Coward had in mind, but from his tone, was grateful that the bigger one had put an end to it. She closed her eyes and willed herself to rest. Sooner or later, one of them would untie her, and then she'd be gone.

Instead of sleep, the morning's events replayed again and again before her mind's eye. Each command Charles issued and all the angry words she'd loosed right up until he left.

Every rebellious step she took after that haunted her. Would he guess what had happened to her? Would anyone ever know?

He would see she'd taken Bliss, but would he bother to check on her? He might think for a day or two that she was upset and staying at her parents'.

So wrapped up in his logging, the man might not have even come home. Wouldn't be the first time he stayed in the woods all night without so much as a word. Or an apology. Or boo, or anything.

The more she pondered her predicament, the more tears tried to well. But no matter how bad things got, she would never let these thieves see her cry.

None of her brothers had ever seen her cry since – when? She couldn't remember, but she hadn't been too old when she decided they'd never get her goat again.

Her brothers. If they only knew, they would come for her. Images of her family flooded her soul. Mama and Daddy. Would she ever see any of them again this side of heaven?

Oh, Lord! Why did He let it happen? Had she really been that bad? She only wanted to visit her mother and help her get the apples

put up. Maybe take home something out of Mama's garden for Charles' supper.

Strong hands jerked her to her feet. Sore Jaw threw her over Bliss then tied her as before. She already hurt all over and hated riding like that. He said something to his partner, then they were off again. Upside down, she couldn't recognize anything, but figured they headed north for the Red.

Charles Nathaniel Nightengale, neither a horseman or a hunter, would never come for her there. Even if he wanted to, his wagon and mules couldn't make it over the trail her captors traveled, through dense woods and across more creeks than she could remember.

Maybe she should have counted them.

After way too long, Sore Jaw stopped and slid off his mount. He walked ahead. On his return, he untied her feet completely then released her hands, still tied together. He pulled her off, looped a long piece of leather, and lowered it around her neck. Nodding, he motioned for her to mount.

She climbed into the saddle, thankful to be allowed to ride erect; more than she'd hoped. How she appreciated any small favor. Maybe her head wouldn't throb so bad.

Sore Jaw, definitely nicer of the two, secured her hands to the horn then her feet to the stirrups and each other again, the strap crossing under Bliss's belly.

Oh, how she wished she'd obeyed her husband and stayed home and cleaned house and weeded the garden and fixed his dinner. What would she give to start the day over?

Her poor mother would never even know if she was dead or alive. She wondered how long Charles would wait before he even went over there to collect her.

That's when they'd all know, and surely way too much time would've passed to pick up any trail. Doomed. Her happy life over.

Sore Jaw slid one of his open palms fast across the other. His gesture told her, 'If you try to escape'. He tugged a bit on the leather thong. She got the message. Shortly, they broke out of the woods and walked straight across the river's bank into the water.

Now, she really got the message. If she tried anything here, she'd be drowned.

Oh, Lord. Once across the Red... Comanche territory.

In the moonlight, with Little Coward riding in front of her and Sore Jaw behind, a single tear ran down her cheek.

How could she ever be saved?

No one was coming for her.

Chapter

Two

The morning grew hotter in the early October sun. The Tehuacana Creek trickled softly behind him as Levi stood at the ready with his Ranger Division. Lined with his brothers-in-arms, he studied the Comanche chiefs who sat cross-legged in front of the politicians and agents beneath the big tent.

None seemed too pleased with the trinkets the government men had spread out on two blankets. He scanned the forty or so warriors who milled about the Comanche side of the big pow-wow.

They seemed at ease, jested with one another; he didn't detect any agitation or anxiousness. Finally, one of the chiefs stood.

Wallace nudged him. "Hey, Baylor, isn't that Old Owl, the peace chief?"

Levi nodded. "Ignore him. Keep an eye on Buffalo Hump. He's the key."

"Think he'll go for it?"

Levi exhaled. "Yeah. I figure he's probably as sick of this war as we are."

Old Owl finished talking then walked to the table the white men sat behind. The grizzled chief bent over and made his mark. One by one, the others rose and added their mark to the treaty.

Buffalo Hump waited until all the rest had signed before he got to his feet. Levi held his breath. Then it was over; a success. President Houston had done it.

No more war with the Comanche.

That afternoon, Levi rode west with five of his men and two Indian agents. One of the lesser chiefs, Bold Eagle, and three of his braves accompanied him as well. He wouldn't relax until this detail was over.

With the wagon the going was slow, but it shouldn't take more than a week. Maybe then he could get some leave. Lord knew he needed it.

Hadn't been home forever. Aunt Sue and Uncle Henry probably already had another kid while he wasn't looking. He smiled thinking of the closest woman to a mother he'd ever had.

He and Major Williamson had warned the men to be on their best behavior. Though it was hard for Levi to believe, he'd heard that some of the women may not be too keen on leaving; especially if children were involved.

Comanche prized their sons and whether the male children were allowed to leave seemed to go on a case by case situation.

That evening after too much food, he fished out the tattered, treasured letter from his cousin; well, Bitty Beck – his nickname for her – was more a sister. He smiled when the image of her telling him that she wanted him to be her real brother sashayed across his mind's eye.

She'd been nine then, him fourteen, if memory served. Right before his Aunt Sue married Henry Buckmeyer. He took the frayed and stained parchment from the envelope and unfolded it for the hundredth time.

August 3, 1839

Dearest Brother,

I pray this missive finds its way into your hands, and that you are well. Mama and Daddy and all the little ones are grand, much more than fine. The family is steadily growing.

Daddy is all fired up to move south. Prices on bois d'arc seed have steadily declined, and he's tired of the process as well. He wants to move the beeves to that land you and he discovered down on the Llano.

Says there's more range there, and he's given Mama his word to finally start that mansion he promised Granddaddy to build for her. They are still so cute together as always.

Do you remember the Fogelsongs? They live a little north of Clarksville. Five brothers followed with a spoiled red-headed little sister, Rosaleen was her name, but everyone called her Sassy.

Levi, with no word, she's turned up missing. Disappeared about a week ago, maybe ten days best as can be calculated.

Her husband of only a few months, a Charles Nightengale – I don't know if you've met him – reported she ran off, as her horse and tack were also gone. I personally do not care for the man. Her mother refuses to accept that she would have left of her own volition. I side with Mis'ess Fogelsong and believe Sassy was stolen.

Inquiring on her behalf, Rose's mother and I discovered

that several neighbors spotted two red men in the area of Kickapoo Creek around the time Rose vanished.

Of what tribe, we have no idea. We think she might have been on her way to her mama's because Mister Nightengale said they'd argued. He'd told her she couldn't go.

Anyway, I promised the dear woman that I'd ask you to please keep an eye out for my friend. Sassy is her mother's beloved, her only daughter who may be forced now to live among the Indians.

If in your duties as a Texas Ranger, you happen to spot a red-haired, white captive, please rescue her and return her to her mother – and her husband, I suppose. It would be a miracle, but we both know God does answer prayers!

He skipped the rest of the letter; almost knew it by heart he'd read it so many times in the last five years.



Something was afoot; Sassy could feel it in her bones.

Bold Eagle and Swift Arrow left three days ago with two yaps from another band. They wore bright face paints, no black, so it wasn't a raiding party. Plus the two from the other band had brought four white women whom they left behind.

Strangest of all was how the old squaws of her band treated those new white women. They hadn't beat them or spit on them at all. Even put them in a teepee all their own, like they were guests or something.

Peculiar goings on, indeed.

Sitting in front of the teepee she shared with all of Bold Eagle's wives, Sassy chewed a nice deer hide into soft leather. She considered where the chief might have gone, but before coming up with anything plausible, her Charley burst forth from a small group of boys his age, whooping with his miniature bow and arrow raised high in the air.

Her son ran toward her with a dead mockingbird in his other hand then skidded to a stop and slapped his chest, much like Bold Eagle often did. In Comanche, he proclaimed, "Me great hunter." He smiled. "Cook it, me hungry!"

She set the hide down and smiled at her son. He grew so fast she could barely keep up. She raised her eyebrows. "Say please in English, and I will."

"No, cook it."

She leaned in close and whispered in English. "I don't care what the others do, Charley Nightengale. You will not be rude and boss your mother around! I'll take you inside and bust your behind. Now I

want a please—in English.”

His bottom lip pouted. He leaned in close to her ear. “Please and thank you, Mama.”

She hated it that he only spoke English when she made him, and that he counted himself Comanche, no matter how many times she told him he was not. Even though the boy’s eyes sparkled light blue and his fair skin clearly defined his race, Bold Eagle had claimed him as his own from the day of his birth.

Bless the Lord that she’d managed to keep from getting pregnant by the man. His oldest Comanche wife would make a special morning tea for her each time she’d been called to Bold Eagle’s teepee.

Even though she figured the older woman did it out of jealousy, the tea served Sassy’s purpose as well.

She took the bird from Charley, and in no time, dressed it and had it roasting on a little spit. Maybe only two bites of meat, but that’s what the little boys did. Soon her son would want to venture farther and stay gone longer.

Before the bird finished roasting, the dogs took to barking. A few of the men grabbed their weapons and headed out toward the east. Bold Eagle rode in with the other warriors following him.

Behind them, six white men on horseback entered camp. Two more in a wagon drawn by four mules followed behind.

“Oh, Glorious Lord!” She grabbed Charley up and ran toward the whites.

Bold Eagle slid off his mount and blocked her way. He held his hand up. “No. You go to wives’ teepee. Stay inside.”

She clutched her baby tight, but balled her fist. He’d beat most of the fight out of her over the years, but seeing these men renewed a hope long since deferred. She could feel her fight returning, and obeying his order, with all the whites suddenly in camp, seemed nothing but wrong.

“Who are these men?”

“Rain-gers.” He butchered one of the few English words he knew then spoke to her in the people’s tongue. “Go inside now with my other wives. Keep your place.”

She wanted to resist, even smack him in his big mouth, but holding Charley kept her from it. She slowly turned and took baby steps toward the wives’ teepee.

Bold Eagle shoved her shoulder blade and sent her flying forward. She almost dropped the boy. She spun and glared at him then walked on to the teepee.

At the door flap, she looked over her shoulder. Her heart leapt. She gasped. How could it be? Levi Baylor! Her childhood friend’s cousin! Levi rode with the rangers.

He would never leave without her if she could only tell him she wanted to go. She had to get his attention, let him know. She'd almost given up on going home; all but quit asking even the Lord, but God sent Levi Baylor.

His coming was her sign.

This was the time. She would be rescued, or she would be dead.

She lifted a prayer of thanksgiving and asked for mercy and favor. Please protect me, Lord, and my son. He would keep her; like He had kept her these five years. At only twenty-one, she was much too young to die. Besides, she had a son to raise.

Charley needed her; he had to go back and live the life he was meant to have with his own people. He needed to meet his father and his grandparents. Her chest expanded when she thought of her mama and daddy.

Her breath caught with even the thought she might really see them again. And uncles! Charley had five uncles to roughhouse with; probably plenty of cousins, too. She smiled. It would be wonderful!

She undid her braid and ran her fingers through her hair, combing it out. She shook it loose around her face. All the better for him to see, to notice her. If she could get to Honey Badger, she could tell him.

All evening, she peeked out. Bold Eagle and the two yaps bargained with the wagon men over the four white women. She caught sight of Levi a couple of times, and pulled the flap more open—as far as she dared.

But he never looked her way. Had he not seen her?

Was this just some bad nightmare? Would she and Charlie wind up forsaken, be Bold Eagle's property for the rest of her life? No! No! No! Whatever it took, she could not miss this chance.

She would not be left behind. She peeked and watched as she could until the white men were bedded, and she knew they would be there in the morning.

Maybe after the other women slept, she could sneak out and find Levi, or at least her friend. She had to!

That night when it came the wives' time to lie down, wait to see who Bold Eagle would call, she replayed each moment from when the rangers and other men came into the camp.

She couldn't remember Levi ever looking her way or meeting her eye. Surely if he saw her, he would recognize her. He'd watched her ever since way back when she used to play with Becky.

But there'd been no hint. Did he know she'd been stolen? That she'd been living with the Indians five long years and at this very moment breathed the same air he breathed? She had to let him know.

He would save her. God had sent him.

The leather strap attached to her big toe jerked. "Oh, Lord, no.

Not this night." It jerked again. She followed it from the wives' buffalo hide wall into Bold Eagle's teepee.

"You did well today, Red Rose."

She nodded once. "I wanted to kill you and eat your liver."

He laughed. "Swift Arrow told me after the trade, that you would do that exact thing one day." He studied her. "Your hair free, why?"

"As I long to be." She kneeled but stayed out of arm's reach. "Will tomorrow hold life and freedom or death?"

He pondered her words. "In the morning, I will act like I could not part with my beloved third wife." He sat straighter. "But I will let them persuade me to trade you."

"And my son? I will not leave him."

He patted the furs. "Tonight you are still mine. Tomorrow you and your son may leave my teepee in peace."

She bowed her head and silently thanked the Lord then took Bold Eagle's hand. "Thank you."



Levi tossed a handful of buffalo chips onto the fire and studied the smoke as it rose in the slight night breeze. Bitty Beck was right, God did answer prayers. What were the odds?

He had seen her, Sassy Fogelson or rather Nightengale, right there in the flesh, clutching a white boy. Would Bold Eagle let them go? What would he do if the chief refused to trade her?

Had he brought anything with him that might sweeten any offer the agents made? He carried so little. Maybe his horse? The Comanche leader already rode one of the nicest stallions Levi had ever seen.

Once his watch ended and he finally allowed himself to lie down for a few hours, he hunted sleep with a question he'd asked himself a hundred times over the years.

What would Uncle Henry do?

But unlike most times, no answer came.

After a few fitful hours, he woke with a jerk. Realization flashed, and he knew exactly what he would do. Hopefully, it would never come to such drastic actions.

Chapter

Three

The morning broke clear and crisp with a hint of the cooler weather to come. Levi loved the autumn best, and hated the winters worst. Shame one came on the heels of the other.

The more he thought about what he knew he needed to do, the more his heart confirmed it the right course to take.

She'd been stolen. Unless she told him otherwise, Sassy and her son would leave with him this morning. He could hardly believe he'd found her. How could it be?

After coffee and a couple of burned biscuits, he pulled Wallace aside. "Partner, keep your wits about you; I've got a bad feeling about Sassy and her son."

"Sassy? Which one is Sassy? And where's her son?"

"That redhead Bold Eagle sent to his teepee when we rode in yesterday."

"Oh, I must not have seen her; I had my eye on that little Comanche boy with the big gun right about then." Wallace glanced around. "Sarge, you know this woman? What kind of bad feeling? Like the one you got last year at Dripping Springs? Or the one at that Dallas saloon when you folded those four nines?"

"Does it matter? I was right both times. And yeah, I do know her."

"What do you have in mind?"

"Nothing particular, but we're not leaving without her."

Wallace studied him for a moment. "How is it you know this lady?"

"Her family's from back home, Clarksville area."

"I see."

"The girl was Bitty Beck's friend; her brothers and I hunted together some." He glanced toward the cluster of teepees. A few older women scurried about. "I didn't know for sure she was stolen, until yesterday."

"And how do you know it's her?"

"Has to be. I've never seen another woman with hair as bright a red as Sassy's."

Wallace smiled at him. "You sweet on her?"

“No, she’s married. Don’t you remember that letter Rebecca wrote me back when she first disappeared?”

“Maybe. Wasn’t that the first one she didn’t beg you to come home every other sentence? But fine then, I’ll keep my wits about me; I didn’t need that morning nap I had planned anyway.”

Levi appreciated his friend. For the years that he and Wallace Rusk had ranged together, he’d never known the man not to be ready, regardless of his sarcasm. It gave him peace that his friend would be on the alert ahead of time in case a fight erupted.



Sassy made herself concentrate on her morning duties. She carried water and wood and did everything expected of her; hopefully, for the last time as the third wife of Bold Eagle.

He called her that, but she knew whose wife she really was.

She tried to bring an image of Charles Nightengale, but his face hung off in the shadows of her mind’s eye, just out of reach.

For certain, he was about the handsomest man she’d ever seen with his dark, wavy hair and his baritone voice; like liquid velvet. She did remember that his blue eyes could melt her with a glance.

Charley had his daddy’s eyes and hair.

Why could she see parts of him but not the whole? Didn’t matter. She married him and would always be his wife in the eyes of God. And when she got home to him, she would be different, give him more respect.

He’d be so surprised. Little Charley was his son, no matter where he was born or who claimed him. Bless the Lord for that. Bold Eagle wouldn’t let her go otherwise.

The morning dragged on, and then it dawned on her: if she was leaving, she must see the first wife. She eased up next to her and asked in a low voice. “Mother, have you brewed your tea?”

She shook her head. “I see you no more after this day.”

Sassy knew the old woman hated her, but not until now had she known exactly how much. Harsh words tried to get past her lips, but she held them unspoken.

No need to cause any ripples now, not when she was so close to freedom. She went back to her chores. What difference did it make anyway? The Lord wouldn’t let her get pregnant right when He was about to answer her prayers and let her go home at last.

Her son ran in and grabbed her hand. “Father says come, now! Hurry!” He tugged her all the way outside then toward where Bold Eagle sat.



Charley loved these new men. They had so many wonderful things to trade. He couldn't wait until they were gone to see what his father would give him. He'd spotted a short knife that would be perfect. He would love it.

He tugged harder on his mother's hand. "Hurry!"

She picked him up. He wiggled, but she wouldn't let him loose. "Put me down!" he demanded in the people's tongue.

"Be still, Charley. And do not tell me what to do."

English! Why did she always have to talk in the strange tongue? He was too big for her to be carrying him around like a papoose. He kicked her side. "Put me down, Mother!"

She stopped and swatted his leg. "Charles Nathaniel Nightengale, Junior, do not kick me. Do you understand?"

He hated it when she called him that. One day, he would earn a great warrior's name, and it would be the end of that ugly white name. He frowned.

If he wanted to run and watch his father bargain with the whites, he'd better appease her. He leaned over and spoke her English into her ear. "Please, Mama. Me hear trades."

"That's better."

"Please, hurry."

She shifted his weight, but did not return him to the ground. "We'll be there soon enough, Son. I want our visitors to know that I am your mother." She cuddled his head to hers.

He hated when she treated him like a baby. For some reason, she seemed especially happy this morning. "Because you are so handsome, and I am so proud of my son!"

She stood at the edge of the gathering of his people who watched the trade goings-on, but soon snaked her way to the front row, still carrying him in her arms.

He liked that he could understand most of what was being said. Sometimes the agents, as they called themselves, said big words that he didn't know. And sometimes, when they spoke his people's tongue, they sounded so funny he wanted to laugh. But he knew his father would send him away if he made any noise.

Swift Arrow sat cross-legged beside his father. He wanted to go and stand between them, show everyone that he was the son of Bold Eagle, but his mother held him tight.

He couldn't stand it if she hit him again here in front of all his people and the white men. None of the other mothers did such a thing to their sons.

The older agent placed a folded blanket on the ground next to a

rifle and two knives. One was the knife Charley had spotted earlier.

Trade, trade, trade, Father. Do it. Make the trade. He willed it so in his head, stared at the long gun a moment, thinking how it would be to shoot it, but he knew his father wouldn't give it to him. The man put another knife down, then smiled.

Bold Eagle waved it all away. "Not enough. She my beloved third wife."

Charley stared at the white man, waiting to see what he would add. Then it hit him. His father said third wife. That was his mother! Was Bold Eagle trading his mother to these men?

No! Who was going to take care of him? His father's other wives didn't love him at all. Don't do it, Father. No trade! No trade!

Again he willed it in his head, only this time, for his father to wave it all away. Jump up, Father! Leave! Tell them no trade!



Her son put his arms around her neck and hugged her tight. Sassy knew it must frighten him that his father was trading her. She patted his back. "It is alright, son. This is a morning of rejoicing."

Levi Baylor carried a big basket of parched corn from the wagon and placed it beside the other stuff. When he glanced up, he stared right at her, and one corner of his mouth pulled back slightly.

He had recognized her! She wanted to run to him and hug his neck, but kept her place. If Bold Eagle discovered she knew the ranger, he might ask too much, so much the agents could never pay it.

She smiled at her childhood friend, though. He wouldn't leave her now that he knew. Her heart could barely contain her joy!



Bold Eagle noticed the slight exchange between the young ranger and his third wife and then looked back at the agent. "No, not enough." He motioned for Red Rose; she walked forward carrying the boy.

Without looking at him or anyone, she knelt beside him then sat on her feet clutching the boy. He took her braid and showed it to the older man. "Her hair of fire alone is worth all these trinkets you offer."

The younger man jabbered in their stupid tongue to his white chief. The old one shrugged and held his hands out. "What else? What more do you want?"

The other interpreted, but Bold Eagle had gotten the message. "Two mules, the paint horse, and the pistol that one hides in his back." He nodded toward the ranger who had smiled at his wife.

The interpreter repeated what he said, then the two retreated to confer with the ranger that the others called Sarge. Real quick, two of their four mules and a paint horse stood beside the agents.

Sarge strolled in, pulled his pistol from his waistband behind his back, then laid it down with the other goods. "Deal."

Bold Eagle stood. He should have asked for more. "Deal."

He glanced at Swift Arrow who started gathering the trade goods. He took the lead rope to the paint and walked away. If Buffalo Hump hadn't insisted, Bold Eagle would have preferred to keep Red Rose and her son, but a time of peace would be welcomed.



Charley couldn't believe his father had traded his mother away. She stood, and he wiggled hard, but she wouldn't let him go. He held his hand out over her shoulder. "Father!"

Bold Eagle kept walking. He didn't even turn around. All of his people looked at the ground, and none would see him. Their eyes were blind and their ears deaf.

"Father! Save me!"

"Hush, Charley. You are going with me. Ranger Baylor is taking us home."

He struggled. "No!" He screamed in the Comanche tongue and kicked as hard as he could. "No! Me home now! Put me down! Put me down now!"

She swatted his leg, embarrassed him in front of all. He would not stand for this. He kicked again and screamed. "Father! Me stay with you! Me stay with my people!"

"Hush, Charley! Hush now! We're going home."

Tears welled then flowed down his cheeks. He hated crying. None of the other boys cried. They said he was weak because of his pale skin and his sky-colored eyes that rained all the time.

He screamed again, but all the people were gone, disappeared into their teepees. He laid his head on his mother's shoulder and sobbed.

Why? Why would his father trade her? Let her take him away? She did not even fight. She should let him stay with his father.



Levi didn't mind the mules so much, but he hated parting with the paint. He and the old boy had been through it all together. He and Wallace watched the village while the other four rangers broke camp.

His friend eased up next to him. "What you thinking now, Sarge?"

"Bold Eagle wasn't happy about giving up Sassy and the boy."

"How you figure? He made out like the bandit he is."

"No, I saw the disappointment in his eyes when I said deal."

"You sure it wasn't because he thought he could have gotten more? You didn't even make a counter offer. Marched in and gave him your pistol and horse like they weren't nothing."

Levi shrugged. Compared to what he thought was going to happen, the horse and gun sure mounted to little of nothing. "I thought about haggling, but I didn't want to give him a chance to change his mind."

A wail pulled them both around. The boy wiggled and squirmed in his mother's arms.

"Well, now that you bought the little wild man, what are you going to do with him?"

Before Levi could answer, the boy wiggled free and ran toward the village. Levi cut him off, but the little guy dodged one way then shot the other. He dove and caught him by a chubby leg.

The boy spit at him and bared his teeth, then rattled off a string of Comanche.

Levi stood and pulled the wiggling boy to his chest. "Be still."

"No! Me down! Now!" The boy spoke in English, then reared back his little fist and hit Levi square in the nose.

Sassy ran up and took her son. "Oh, Levi, you're bleeding. Charley! Tell Sergeant Baylor you're sorry."

"No, let me down."

She swatted his leg, and the boy screamed in Comanche. She raised her hand again.

Levi touched her forearm. "Hold on." He glanced at the village. Other than a couple of dogs walking about, nothing moved. "Let's don't give Bold Eagle any reason to alter his decision."

"You're right." She turned and walked toward the wagon, her arms wrapped around the boy. "I've never been so happy to see anyone as I was you! Thank you!"

Other than a few screaming fits from little Charley, Levi got his detail on the trail without a hitch. He walked next to the agents' wagon. Once the village fell from view, he relaxed a bit.

After another hour or so, he fell back from the wagon and called Wallace over.

He gave him a nod. "Looks like we did it."

"So far, but Austin's a right far piece."

Wallace smiled. "Not much of a hill though for steppers like us."

"How about you and Smitty go find us some supper?"

"We could do that."

Levi glanced at the sun. "We should make that clump of live oaks we camped at the last night on our way in without much trouble."

“I’ll be the one there napping by the cook fire.”

Levi waved him away, and then watched as he and Smith rode ahead.

A twinge of regret gnawed at the bad feeling that hadn’t completely vanished. He’d just sent two guns riding off. He told himself he was being an old maid worrywart, but without much conviction.

He looked behind him and studied the horizon. Nothing, but that didn’t mean they weren’t out there. The Comanche could track a lizard over a hundred mile of flat rock and never be seen.

Chapter

Four

Finally, Charley stopped wiggling; Sassy gave him a minute, and then leaned over her son. His lids hung half open with glazed eyes. As she watched, they closed, and his breathing deepened.

She hated it that he'd chosen Bold Eagle over her, and she hated to admit it, but she'd had a little remorse herself. If she'd met the man first under different circumstances....

That thought wasn't worth the thinking. She shook it away. He was a brute who killed human beings without a thought or any regret.

No way would her Charles murder anyone; much too much a gentleman for such barbaric actions. She chuckled to herself. Bold Eagle would call him – she searched her memory but couldn't find the Comanche word for fop; maybe worse.

Most certainly, there would be no contest if her husbands were ever to fight over her. She let that scene play out in her mind's eye for a while then told herself to think on something else.

She'd miss her only friend, Honey Badger; maybe they would meet again. While she remembered the kind woman and wondered who would be her friend now, Levi caught up to the agents' wagon she and her son and the other women rode in.

She held her hand over the wagon's side. "Thank you, thank you, Levi."

He smiled. "No thanks needed; only doing my job."

"You didn't have to give up your horse and pistol."

"Horses are cheap, and I've had my eye on this new Colt anyway."

He walked closer, and she patted his shoulder. "How's your nose?"

He rubbed the bottom of it with a finger. "Never been hit so hard in all my days."

She laughed.

"Well, now, there was this one time Bitty Beck cold-cocked me when I was ten and she was what? Five or six I suppose."

"How is Rebecca? Is she married?"

For the next few minutes, he caught her up on his family's goings on. It pained her a bit that her friend hadn't found anyone to love yet. Already at twenty-one years old, she might not; but it thrilled her that

Sue and Henry were still as much in love and so happy with more baby girls.

"That's what I know, but it's been a spell since I've been home, almost two years. Everything may have changed." He chuckled. "Uncle Henry's been wanting to move south for a while since you've been gone. Man, it's been five years since Bitty Beck's letter telling me you'd gone missing."

"I remember you calling her that." Sassy smiled then held her breath a moment. "Any news on my folks?"

"Her letter said your mother never believed you ran off. I did run into Frank a couple of years back, late spring of forty-two; right after the Mexican invasion at San Antonio. He was scouting for the volunteers under Vice President Burleson. Frank's your second oldest brother, right?"

"Yes. Always the adventurer, wanting to explore new territory. It doesn't surprise me a bit."

"Anyway, then I saw him again in Dallas around the new year."

"Dallas? Where's that?"

"A new settlement between San Antonio and Clarksville on the Trinity." He looked off toward the horizon. "We exchanged a howdy; didn't visit much."

Were all men that way? What could be more important than catching up with an old friend you hadn't seen in years?

"He said –" Levi wiped his mouth like he wanted to take away that he'd mentioned anything else.

"What is it? What did he say?"

He looked into her eyes. "Nothing. Isn't my place, shouldn't have to say anything. Sorry."

"Please tell me, Levi. I can handle it, I promise. Not telling me would be worse."

He grimaced. "Well, your mother was with him. I didn't see her, but Frank said so."

Sassy didn't like hearing that. Her mama was the biggest died-in-the-wool homebody she ever knew. "In Dallas? Did he say why Mama was there?"

He nodded and pursed his lips. "I'm so sorry to bring bad news. Frank said she was living with him now. Your daddy passed the spring before."

She gasped and covered her mouth.

Her eyes blurred with tears, and she couldn't keep them from overflowing. She stared at her sleeping boy and went to rocking. Daddy would never see his grandson.

She hugged Charley tighter.

Oh, Lord, why did he have to die?

She hated it that she'd not been there for him – and her mother. She must have been devastated. Poor Mama.

"I'm sorry, Sassy."

She shook her head and wiped her cheek. "No, I'm glad you told me. I'd have found out sooner or later." She sniffed then smiled. "Did you know Daddy's the one gave me that nickname?"

"I did not."

"When I was only two, so the story goes. The brothers were taking turns giving me trouble, and I held my ground with my hands on my hips telling each one after the other just how the cow ate the cabbage. Daddy loved telling that story."

His deep laughter still remained in her memories. He would always live in her heart and memories until she saw him again in heaven. She smiled and cleared her throat. "So where are we headed now? Are y'all going to take each of us home? Who's first?"

Glancing around at the other ladies in the wagon, she concluded no one tried to hide their eavesdropping. None of the other rangers paid any attention to them, so what did it matter one way or the other?

Sassy rejoiced that she had old ties with Levi and understood why they listened unashamedly. They all wanted to know the answers to her questions.

"Austin's our first stop."

"Where's that?"

"South, between Dallas and San Antonio."

The youngest of the women sat up straighter. "Mister, my given name be Laura, Laura Langley, and I's from up there pert near Dallas; s'pose y'all might could drop me off effin' you're going by there on your way?" She looked at her belly and rubbed it. "Sure would be proud to get on home 'fore this here lil'un 'cides he wants out."

"Sorry, we've got to go straight to Austin, ma'am."

Sassy leaned forward and took the girl's hand. "It won't be too much longer. Keep focusing on the fact you're free and on your way home!" She turned back to him. "So much has changed in five years. There's so many new places."

"Texas is growing alright. They're saying we're about to be annexed as a full-fledged state of the United States of America, skipping being a territory."

"Oh, that's wonderful, isn't it?"

"I believe most folks think so. Anyway, Austin is about two hundred or so miles due south from Dallas." He pointed to the ground. "And north of San Antonio by around a hundred and fifty miles. It's on the Colorado River." He jacked his thumb up.

Her mother used to make her study the map, so she had some idea

where they were headed. "Why there; so far south?"

"It's been the capital since you've been gone I reckon. President Lamar bullied the legislators into moving it there from Houston in '39. Claimed Sam's town was too humid."

"Really?" She'd missed out on so much. It was like she'd lived in a whole other world since that horrible day she was stolen. "So Houston isn't the president any more?"

"Well, he is, actually. President again. But he wasn't back then." He laughed. "He's got the office for a few more months; 'til the end of the year anyway."

Her head spun. It all didn't make a lot of sense. But she never cared that much for politics anyway. Her daddy and brothers bored her to death with talk of it all. "So how long will it take us to get to Austin?"

"Maybe a week."

The young girl spoke up again. "So then you think we might just be going somewheres close ta Dallas then? 'Cause it'd be iff'n' y'all could just be droppin' me right there on the road. I can walk on to the—"

"No, ma'am, sorry. We're pretty far west of Dallas."

Another lady in the wagon leaned forward. "Well then, do you know when we can go home, young man? My family doesn't even know if I'm dead or alive."

The quietest of the ladies sat on the other side of Sassy. She looked up with hollow eyes. "Least you got family to go home to. Comanche slaughtered mine."

Sassy placed her hand on the woman's shoulder and patted and rubbed.

Levi shook his head and pointed to the government men driving the wagon. "They'll have some paper work, I'm sure. Then we'll see what Major Williamson has in mind." He gave Sassy a nod. "But I'm overdue for leave and pay, so if the big guns don't go stirring the pie, maybe you and little Charley can go north with us."

She smiled. "Who's us?"

"Wallace Rusk, the ranger I sent ahead to do some hunting for supper. We've been rangering together from the start. He's infatuated with Rebecca, heard me talk about her so much. I've read him all her letters.

"I finally promised that I'd introduce them. We've been talking about going once the Indian war was over, and now it is." He gave her a big smile. "I'd love nothing better than to show up with you and him in tow."

"Oh, me, too! That sounds wonderful!" Her heart hurt over her daddy, but he'd be in the presence of the Lord. Never knew a man of

stronger faith, not even the preacher.

She'd thought about going on to Heaven herself when Swift Arrow traded her to Bold Eagle, but then discovered her pregnancy and the baby had to be Charles'.

No, not even that bad news would spoil this day. Nothing could dampen her ecstatic mood.

She was free.

Going home, and what safer travel could she ask for than being escorted by two Texas Rangers? She would like to see her mother, too, though.

"So, Levi, would Dallas be much out of the way once we head north again?"



Levi figured immediately why she asked and hated to disappoint her, so he only shrugged. Didn't rightly want to go hunting all over North Texas for Frank Fogelsong. "A week, maybe more."

The smell of smoke drew his attention away from the talkative ladies. Ahead, drifting out of the clump of live oaks they'd camped at before, a thin column of smoke rose.

Soon enough, he spotted Wallace resting his head on his saddle, his hat over his eyes. A fair-sized jack and two smaller rabbits roasted on a spit.

Not long until he got within ear shot. "Where's Smitty?"

His best friend lifted the hat and sat up. "Can't a man ever get a nap in this outfit?"

Levi snorted. "Wallace, you haven't slept a wink in all the years we've been rangering. Now where's Smith?"

His friend stood, watched until the wagon full of ladies roll past, then eased closer. "He's scouting. We caught a mirror flash in the hills. Then an answer about an hour ago, close to the time we spotted your dust cloud coming." He looked west. "We ain't alone, Sarge."

Levi grimaced. He'd hoped that nagging in his gut would prove wide of the mark, but apparently Bold Eagle deemed his third wife and her pale-skinned boy too much a prize.

Maybe he'd planned it all along. Let them get away, but slow them down by demanding two of their mules and his paint in trade.

Once Smith returned, Levi relaxed some. If there had been a raiding party out there, he would have spotted them.

After the not-near-enough rabbit supper, he set the watches with him and Wallace taking the last one. More times than not, the Comanche had struck right before dawn, at the darkest hour.

He bedded the women and boy under the wagon with the agents

inside. Both were armed, but Levi figured they wouldn't be much good in a fight.

The older government man made a fuss about pitching his own tent, but once Levi took him aside, the old boy shut his mouth and did as told.



Sassy rocked Charley until he finally gave in and dozed off. He'd eaten the rabbit but refused the beans and hard tack. In Comanche he called them white man's poison, and wouldn't eat them.

She'd seen all the hushed conversation between Levi and the other rangers and figured they were expecting a raid. She laid Charley down then eased out from under the wagon. Levi stood next to one of the oaks that guarded their camp site.

"You got an extra gun?"

Looking at her, he smiled. "Seems I traded it away a few miles back."

"A knife then?"

He hesitated a moment then pulled a sheathed blade out of his belt. "This do?"

She hefted it then ran her thumb over the edge. "Sharp."

He rubbed his cheek. "I've had better, but it shaves fine in a pinch."

She looked out and saw nothing but shapeless shadows blurring into a moonless, star-studded sky. "What are you expecting?"

He shrugged. "Everything, nothing. Why do you ask?"

"Oh, you've been on edge ever since you talked with your friend right after we got here. And the old agent wanted to sleep in his tent until you took him aside, and now he's in the wagon peeking out every few minutes. I see you out here searching every shadow." She smiled. "So, what's out there?"

"Well now, you don't miss much do you?"

"Well now, do you ever give a straight answer?"

"Sometimes, but I really don't know. Wallace and Smitty saw a mirror flash and then later, an answer." He glanced toward the wagon then back to her. "I don't think its Bold Eagle. If it were him, I figured we would have seen sign of a raiding party."

"I hope you're right."

"Me, too."



Bear Fang watched as the ranger and the white woman talked. The one Bold Eagle called Red Rose. It surprised him that the war

chief had traded her away. But that did not concern him.

He only agreed to give up his new wife to make Buffalo Hump and the other old chiefs happy. But never gave his word he would not steal her back.

He loved her pale skin and blue eyes. His sun and moon.

Soon she would belong to him again. He would take her south to the other side of the Rio Bravo where he should have gone when he first heard about Old Owl's ignorant idea of living with the whites in peace.

He regretted that his signal to Runs Like Antelope had been seen, but even that meant nothing. He would walk among them just as he walked among the buffalo without being seen.

He would have her back, and the one they called Baylor would never see him or even know she was gone.

Chapter

Five

Soft steps pried Levi's left eye open. Smitty walked toward him. He kneeled and touched his shoulder. "Sarge."

Levi nodded then sat up and mouthed. "Anything?"

Smith shook his head, handed him his pistol, and then headed toward his saddle and bedroll. Levi tucked the gun in his waistband, grabbed his rifle and took his place on the south side of camp.

Studying the shadows in the starlight, for the longest time he saw nothing. Then twice, right before false dawn, he about convinced himself of movement. Were his eyes playing tricks on him?

The third time, he realized he did see something. He stared a bit away then clearly caught the intruder out of the corner of his eye, exactly like Uncle Henry had taught him so long ago.

He looked over in Wallace's direction but couldn't see his friend. Easing up slowly, he inched toward the intruder.

Three quick steps of soft moccasins running on dirt pulled him around. A shadow leapt toward him. He fell backwards and raised his feet. He caught the man midsection and tossed him over his head.

He rolled. Pushed himself up. Pulled Smitty's pistol, cocked, and fired. The blast blinded him for an instant, but he quickly recovered. The Comanche lay in the dirt clutching his chest.

Levi kicked him. The brave groaned but didn't get up. He turned his attention to the camp. A woman screamed. He saw movement; couldn't make anything out but dark shapes. He found his rifle and ran toward the wagon.

Another redskin had an arm wrapped around Sassy and the young pregnant woman. He held a knife to the redhead's throat. Wallace stood off to the side with his long gun aimed. Under the wagon, the other women scrambled into a huddle.

The Indian held Laura next to him, her frantic eyes wide in the starlight, trapped with his knife arm around her neck. If she struggled, Sassy got cut.

Levi raised his rifle, cocked, and aimed. "Duck ladies." They both went limp, and he squeezed the trigger. The trio fell into a heap.

He reached them as Sassy untangled herself and stood. Splattered

with blood, she looked at him then back to the Comanche. The left side of his skull was gone. Dark lifeless eyes stared blankly at the sky.

The younger woman screamed again and crawled on her knees to his side. She laid her head on his chest. "I'm sorry, Bear Fang. So sorry."

She looked up at Sassy. "He was kind to me, gentle. He didn't want to give me back, called me his sun and moon." She sobbed. "I – I'm carrying his child." She touched her extended belly.

The compassionate lady kneeled beside her and hugged her. Laura turned and held tight to Sassy while Levi dragged the body from camp. He went to check on the other brave, but he had disappeared.

In the morning they would follow the blood trail.

Levi brought the cook fire back to life and put a pot of coffee on to brew. Sassy sat huddled with the young girl, hugging her and cooing soft words. He sat on his haunches and stared at the fire waiting for the coffee and enough light. Wallace joined him. "Your gut ever been wrong?"

"Maybe, it ain't ever warned me about you."

"Well, mine's telling me I about had enough of rangering. Not that I ain't enjoyed riding all over the territory meting out justice, devil knows I do, but I's thinking, how 'bout you trade me your sister for my land grant?"

Levi laughed. "You know she's really my cousin, but if you can get past Uncle Henry and Aunt Sue, you're more than welcome to her. Probably going to take someone like you to keep her in line."

Wallace looked toward the eastern sky, now only lacking the sun itself for full brightness. "I like that. Never been one to shrink from a challenge. Is she really as pretty as you claim?"

"Pretty doesn't describe her." Levi looked past his friend. "What would you say?"

Sassy shrugged. "I admit always being jealous of Rebecca. My brothers claimed I was pert near the prettiest thing they'd ever laid eyes on." She shrugged again like it wasn't brag, just fact. "Maybe they thought Becky was the prettiest, and that's why they told me I was pert near." She laughed.

Her brothers told no lies. Not a body alive could ever claim Sassy was hard to look at, but his Bitty Beck took the cake. He couldn't imagine what she looked like now that she'd matured, probably a lot like his Aunt Sue before all the little Buckmeyer ladies came along.

He forced his attention to the here and now and nudged Wallace. "We best see to that other one."

Fifty paces out, he found the Comanche lying face down. He flipped him over. His eyes stared ahead—lifeless. Levi kicked him hard, but the man didn't respond. He turned and walked away. He

might have to fight him again, but not in this life.



The long days of traveling wore on Sassy and the other women. One lady in particular about drove her crazy complaining from dawn to dusk. She didn't figure anything would ever please the woman.

Way Sassy saw it, the yap who owned her should have paid the agents to take her back. The ingrate certainly didn't appreciate anything the rangers or anyone else was doing for her, and that wore on Sassy's nerves.

The other three ladies spent all their time together telling each other their lives. The one with hollow eyes and nobody to go home to took charge of the cooking with Laura as her helper.

Sassy liked that, and spent her time with Charley. No one seemed to mind.

On the fifth morning, she woke up before dawn and stretched. She reached for Charley but couldn't find her baby. She sat straight up looking every direction around her, but he was nowhere to be seen.

Crawling from under the wagon, she scanned all around the camp. "Charley!" She ran to the other side of the wagon screaming frantically. "Charley!" She didn't care whom she woke up.

Suddenly, Levi stood at her side. He touched her shoulder and motioned for her to follow. He led her out to the north a bit. About a hundred or so strides out, Charley ran as fast as his little legs would carry him.

She took a step, and Levi touched her arm. She faced him. "He's getting away."



Levi nodded. "Let's let him go a while. The little scalawag didn't start running until you called his name."

She put her hand over her heart and sighed. "I don't know what I'm going to do with him. I never thought he'd still be trying to go back. I know he loves me, but –"

"It'll take time."

She shook her head and watched her son's escape. "Did you know the Comanche don't discipline children at all?"

"I've heard that, and about their method of scaring them." He pointed at the boy. "He'll come around, I'm sure of it."

"I only hope it's sooner rather than later."

"Go get a cup of coffee, Sassy. I'll cold trail him."

She sighed. "You sure?"

Glancing again in the boy's direction, he seemed in deep thought.

"Maybe I can get through to him."

"Should I go with you?"

He laughed. "No. You're the one he's running from. I promise not to let him get away." He grinned.

She didn't come across with a full-blown smile, but the corner of her mouth did lift a tiny bit; then she turned back toward camp.

Levi gave him a few more steps, and then took out after him. The little guy made pretty good time, even if he was heading in the wrong direction. Twice, he lost sight of him, but with a few strides of double time, caught back up.

After a quarter of a mile, he looped east and increased his pace until he paralleled the boy. Up ahead, a large rocky outcropping lay right in the boy's path. Levi hurried to get in front of him and climbed to the top.

Charley stopped at the rock and glanced over his shoulder.

"Your mother cries many tears, little man."

The boy looked up. "No care. Me go home."

Levi pointed west. "It's that direction. You're heading the wrong way."

"No. Am not. Whites lie."

Levi liked this kid. He had an answer for everything. "Did you know those two men that tried to steal your mama and that other lady?"

"Yaps. Some fat moons yaps raid with father."

Levi slid down the outcropping. "He's not your father."

Charley balled his fist and glared. "Me son of Bold Eagle."

"No. That isn't true. Your father is white. The chief traded you and your mother to me for my paint horse and pistol. He didn't want you anymore."

The boy's face turned from pink to bright red. He gritted his teeth. "No. You lie."

"You were there. He walked off with my horse and gun, and I've got you and your mother. She's the one who loves you. You should never run away from her."

Charley continued to glare, but tears welled then overflowed down his chubby cheeks. His shoulders slumped. He melted to the ground sobbing.

Levi hated hurting the kid's heart, but Uncle Henry said the truth would set you free.

He kneeled beside the boy, patted his head, and then picked him up. Charley laid his head on his shoulder and continued sobbing.



A cold wind whipped Sassy's long hair into her face as she saw to her necessities. Back in camp, she shook out her sleeping blanket and wrapped it around her shoulders as the other ladies had.

She wished the agents hadn't needed to trade so many blankets. They could use the extras now.

From the northwest, a dark wall of clouds moved toward them. Wallace stood near the fire, studying the horizon. "Storm coming, ladies. Let's get it packed up."

She watched for Levi and Charley while she helped load and put the canvas over the wagon's staves. She stowed the Dutch oven with the leftover biscuits in what had become her and Charley's corner.

The agents worked on hitching the mules when she finally spotted Levi approaching with her baby draped over his shoulder.

Her heart caught in her throat. What had happened to him? She ran toward them, but Levi held his hand up and waved her off. She stopped and exhaled then met him halfway.

"What happened?"

Levi shook his head and mouthed later. He waited for her to climb into the wagon then handed her the boy. He turned his back. "We ready?"

"Yes, Sarge."

The wind swirled and blew colder by the minute, but only a few drops of icy rain blew in. Charley let her hold him for the longest, then scooted out and glared. "Bay-lor own me? You?"

Sassy recoiled from his words. No one owned her or her son, and no one ever would. "Why do you ask?"

"Him trade horse and gun. We him's."

Was that why her boy's eyes were so red and puffy?

"Him say Bold Eagle no want."

"He did make the trade."

Charley's bottom lip pouted. He leaned in close and spoke in Comanche. "If the people come, who wins?"

"Baylor and the rangers," she answered without hesitation then hoped that her words would never be tested.

He looked away for a while then lay back against her. She wrapped the blanket around him. Hopefully, he wouldn't try to run away again, but she wouldn't rest well until home.



Charley snuggled in tight. He loved her, but missed his father, uncles, and friends. How could he earn a great name with the whites? Who could he count coup on? His brothers?

Could he ever make war on them? No! And all other tribes were old women and boys. That was what his father called them. He

thought of Bay-lor. The people speak the ranger's name in hushed tones. What great deed had he done to earn such a name?

"Mama? Is Bay-lor father now?"

"No, son. He's our friend. I played with his little sister when I was a girl not much older than you; I've known him many years. Your father is a white man like Baylor, but his name is Charles Nathaniel Nightengale."

"What you call me?"

"Yes. I named you after your father, Charles Nathaniel Nightengale, Junior." She rubbed his arm. "He's a good man. Baylor will take us home to him."

"Where home?"

"Dimple is where I grew up. North from here. Hopefully we will find your grandmother – my mama – there, too. And you have five uncles – my brothers – and many cousins. Your father and I lived in Boxelder, not too far away."

He yawned. "I run far, Bay-lor found me."

"Yes, my love." She started rocking. "He found us both."

Chapter

Six

That promised last morning before reaching the capital broke brisk and bright as autumn morns were apt to do in the Texas hill country. Sassy loved it. She'd love it even more two hundred miles north and another one-fifty or so east, but understood things had to be done according to a certain set of rules.

At least she lived again amongst white folks, her people, and for that, she'd willingly defer to whatever the government men required. But she wanted to be home, see her mother and be able to introduce Charley to his real daddy.

She could hardly wait. And even though Charles might think otherwise at first, it would only take one look. He could not deny his son; if ever two peas were in a pod....

Movement pulled her eyes forward. Another wagon angled into the main road and cut in front of the agents. Wallace rode ahead, visited with the folks, and then reported to Levi, who chose still to walk next to the government wagon.

"Pilgrims, Sarge. Hunting the promise land. Said they heard about the land grants. Any of your certificates for sale?"

Levi waved him off. "I'm buying, not selling. What about that headright of yours?"

"I don't know. Tell me again exactly how good looking is Rebecca?"

Sassy turned away. Those two poked fun at each other over nothing and everything, but bless God, she couldn't imagine where she'd be now if it wasn't for Levi and his rangers.

Who else would have given up his horse and gun? It was no coincidence the Lord sent Levi Baylor to ride into that particular camp on that wonderful morning.

Even though she'd heard Wallace and Smitty both offer to share their mounts, Levi insisted on walking. Not that he talked all that much, but it seemed like he wanted to stay right there next to the wagon everyday, all day, and always on her side.

But why? She studied him for a moment as he bantered with his friend. They'd been making ten, maybe twelve miles a day for a week

now. He had to be worn out, but didn't show any sign of fatigue.

She looked over at the fifteen-year-old who sat in a ball hugging her knees. "How you feeling this morning?"

"Sick to my stomach, but at least this here trip's about over."

Laura gave a weak smile. "I'm ready to get on back home."

Ne'er-be-satisfied made an incredulous, disgusting humph sound. "You actually believe everything's going to be blue skies and rainbows then? Girl, you're fixin' to go through the mill." She shook her head. "What do you think your parents are going to say when you pop out a little half-breed? And who'll ever want to marry you then?"

She threw a hand up toward Sassy. "Who are you glaring at? Correct me if I'm wrong. Go ahead and tell her if it ain't the truth."

"Have you no soul? Not even an ounce of compassion? Why do you feel the need to be so negative all the time? And so cruel?"

Laura lay her head over on the shoulder of the quiet, sad lady and wept. The woman rubbed her hair like one might rub a puppy. Without waking Charley who napped in her lap, Sassy eased over beside her and patted her, too.

"Don't you worry, honey. God delivered you from the Comanche, so you have to know that He has a plan for your life. And there's nothing too hard for Him to fix."

The mean woman rolled her eyes and shook her head.

As the sun climbed higher, the day warmed. Laura helped Sassy roll the wagon's canvas up and tie the sides. Before long, more wagons and men on horseback clogged the road to Austin.

Calls of recognition and greetings passed between travelers. Many eyes fell on the wagon filled with white women dressed in Indian garb and lingered, staring, but Sassy let her blanket fall off her shoulders like a shawl and sat up all the straighter.

A buggy with a distinguished-looking gentleman dressed in a fancy suit and top hat passed. He didn't even look their way or speak to the rangers or agents. Levi eased closer.

"Congressman, maybe even a senator. Other than Houston and a precious few others, the whole bunch are worthless."

Sassy leaned out. The buggy horse worked a good lather. "He better ease up on that gelding, or he'll be walking soon."

Levi laughed. "No, he'd insist on putting us out and appropriate this government-owned wagon and set of mules in a heartbeat."

"You're joshing."

"No, ma'am, not at all. To hear them tell it, what they do is of the utmost importance. And if we mere commoners arrived a day or two late? No real consequence."

That almost flabbergasted her. Why, she'd never known a white man who didn't defer to women and children. "Humph, and I

considered him a gentleman for his fancy clothes and hat.”

She followed the buggy as it weaved in and out of the traffic at a good clip. “Poor horse.” She faced Levi again. “I’ll miss my Bliss once I get home. Oh well, there’ll be no getting her back. So what’s going to happen now that we’re here?”

“We’re to deliver you ladies to the capitol. The agents have an office there. I have to find the major, but I’ll check on you later.”

“That will be wonderful. I can’t tell you how much it has meant to have you help me through all this.”

He smiled and tipped his hat. “My pleasure.”

The wagon rounded a corner. The number of enormous buildings that lined the double, no triple-wide road astonished her.

“Ain’t it something?” Levi scanned the road, too. “Still growing like crazy and changing almost daily. Seems every freeman this side of the Mississippi wants a piece of Texas, and they’ve all come here to Austin.”

Rightly amazed, she shook her head. “Bold Eagle took us to a big powwow once, but no way would it compare to this. Why, there are at least a hundred folks out and about and at least fifty buildings.”

She pointed to the hills around the booming town. “And just look at all those houses.” She could barely take it all in. “My, my.” She pointed west. “What’s that big building?”

“The capitol, but they’re already planning another one, seems that one isn’t grand enough for them.”

After a few hundred yards down the extra wide road, the rangers stopped at a single-story plank lumber building. Levi grabbed his saddle then tipped his hat. “I’ll find you later.”

She nodded, still trying to absorb the mass of humanity. As he stepped onto the building’s porch, she hollered after him. “Thanks again.”

He turned and waved. “Take care.”

Two braves walking the street caught her eye. Her heart skipped a beat. She looked back down to where Levi had parted ways wishing he still walked beside her.

Almost immediately, she realized they posed no threat. Must be Creeks or Caddo, the ones Comanche called little girls and old women.

Charley, who sat in her lap and had been relatively quiet, must have seen them, too. He called out in Comanche. The men glanced his direction but didn’t respond. Her son spat. “Old women.”

She leaned in and whispered. “Best behave. Bay-lor isn’t here to save you.”



Holding out his wad of papers, Levi shook his head. "Nothing but this worthless script?"

The major shrugged. "They're working on it. We'd all like to be paid in coin, but the big guns don't part easily with what little they have."

"What about my horse? And pistol?"

The man laughed. "I'll submit a voucher for you, but don't look for anything soon."

Levi glanced out the window then back. "I need my money box then."

"Sure." The major rolled his chair over to the large safe that sat in the corner of his office. He blocked Levi's view as he tumbled the numbers around. The man pulled out the metal box and set it on his desk. "Forgot to tell you. I put you and Rusk in for promotions."

Sounded about right; promotions instead of regular pay. Levi snorted. "For what?"

"You for captain, and him sergeant."

"You tell him that?"

"Yeah, right before he said you two were taking leave."

He picked up his strong box. "That's right."

"Where you going?"

"Home to Clarksville. Wallace wants to meet my sister."

The major laughed. "You sure that's a good idea?"

Opened his box, transferred the coins to his vest pocket, then he folded the papers and stowed them away in his duster's inside pocket. "I promised him in a moment of weakness."

The major opened the desk's side-drawer and pulled out a handful of flyers. "Keep an eye out; the bounty on any of these would make the trip worth while."

"Don't you ever stop working?"

The man poked them in Levi's chest. "No. And neither should you, Captain Baylor."

He thumbed through them glancing at each one then stuck them in his duster's outside pocket. "We'll see about that. Any word on statehood?"

"No. And stay out of politics. Rangers need to sway whichever way the wind blows." He slammed the desk drawer as if irritated with the way it blew. "Any idea how long you expect to be gone?"

"No, sir." Resisting the urge to salute, Levi marched out of the major's office. Like he could stay out of politics; it was his life, too, they were deciding. Though loyal to Houston, he would readily admit Lamar and his crowd made a compelling argument for remaining a republic.

He stood on the porch a minute and studied both sides of the

street, first left, then right, but never spotted Wallace's gelding. He headed to the livery both he and his friend preferred.

Even if he had to spend his own money, he was buying himself a horse. His friend had beat him there. His gelding stood napping—stalled, hayed, and obviously groomed, but the man himself? Nowhere to be found.

Two hours later, Levi strolled up Congress Avenue, seven twenty-dollar gold coins lighter, but a stout wagon pulled by two mules with harness and hobbles—and one fine gray stallion—richer.

The horse reminded him of the big one Bold Eagle rode.

He found Wallace at the third saloon he checked, but didn't much want a drink. "You going to be ready to leave in the morning?"

"What's your hurry, Captain? We just got here."

"Don't start that. Nothing's been approved yet."

Wallace took a sip of his whiskey. "It's long overdue, Captain." He stressed the word. "Those idiots should have promoted you after the Plum Creek battle in '40."

Levi didn't have an argument for that; his first encounter with Buffalo Hump had turned into quite a fight. No matter now though, he didn't want to hang around Austin any longer than required.

He leaned in close to his friend. "We best get ourselves out of town before something happens."

"Like what?"

"Like anything. You know how they do us. Trouble starts, and the whole Republic is riding on the rangers' backs."

"You figure Miss Sassy and young Master Charley are going to be ready in the morning?"

He laughed. "If I asked her to, I have no doubt she'd be ready to leave tonight if that's what I wanted."



After the bigger part of the afternoon passed, she understood why the agent asked for their patience. No one there seemed to know what they were doing.

Though arriving hours ago, none of the ladies had been offered anything to eat, and dusk approached before the government men had all four women and her and Charley processed.

The four-year-old had not been on his best behavior, and wore Sassy's nerves raw by the time a wiry little man led them out single file and down the hill.

He didn't stop at any of the fancy boarding houses close to the capitol building, but led them to one of the clapboard and chink hotels on the main road. The place looked nice enough.

He opened the front door. "Ladies, if you will be so kind, there's a lovely bed waiting for you to sleep in tonight."

Mis'ess Complainer piped up. "Is there a bath?"

"There's a wash bowl and pitcher of water in each room. And first thing in the morning a small stipend at Caddenhead's Haberdashery has been arranged. Please give the clerk your name, and he'll take charge from there."

The man bowed and removed his hat. "As a representative of the Republic of Texas, it has been my pleasure to have served each one of you." He headed for the door.

Sassy stopped him before he could open it. "What about our meals? None of us has eaten since breakfast, and we don't have any money."

"The hotel has a dining room. The night and three meals have been allotted."

Ne'er-be-satisfied couldn't hold her tongue, but this time Sassy better understood where she was coming from. "What about after that?"

He shrugged. "Other arrangements will have to be made."

She took a step toward him, but the door opened, and Levi strolled in smiling. He looked around the room until his eyes fell on Sassy. "There you are."

The government man tipped his hat. "Sergeant Baylor, good to see you again, sir."

Levi tapped his hat's bill, but didn't take his eyes off her. Seeing his face again brought such relief that she wanted to hug him.

Charley pulled his hand out of hers and faced Levi. "Bay-lor. Where you been?"

Levi kneeled then bent a bit more until eye-to-eye with the boy. "All over; been busy." He pulled a stack of papers from his duster's pocket. "Look at all the bad men; the major wants us to be on the lookout for them when we go north."

Charley took the flyers and studied them.

Levi stood. "You eat yet?"

"No, nothing since breakfast."

"Come on then, I know a great place down by the river."

She pointed at the front desk. "I'm supposed to check in, and my meals have already been arranged here."

Levi looked past her to the clerk. "Sassy Nightengale, she and her son will be back later. Don't give away her room."

"Yes, sir, Sergeant Baylor."



Charley ran between his mother and Bay-lor. He worked hard at matching his stride with the man's. He liked it that the other men deferred to his ranger, and the major, who must be like the big chief, counted him able to hunt all the bad men.

Grabbing the man's pant leg, he tugged. "When we go north?"

He looked down. "Maybe tomorrow."

His mother stopped and faced Bay-lor. "That would be wonderful, but how is that possible? We spent all afternoon waiting, and then all we got was one night in a hotel and three meals. Oh, and I can get a dress tomorrow. The agent told us where to go."

He laughed. "They don't own either one of us. We can come and go as we please now."

"True enough, but we're both afoot. You could probably walk home, but I don't think Charley and I would make it."

"Me walk." He folded his arms over his chest.

They both looked at him then smiled at each other. "I'm sure you could, little man, but we don't have to. I procured a wagon, a set of mules, and a real nice gray this afternoon."

His mother's eyes widened. "Wow, you must have a lot of pull with someone."

The man walked away. "Come on, I'm hungry."

Charley was too. Humph. The people taught admitting hunger showed weakness, but Bay-lor not weak. Not only did he kill those two yaps, he'd gotten the best of Bold Eagle in a trade, right in his own camp.

No. Nothing weak about his friend.

When they reached the eating place, more men knew Bay-lor, and some patted him on the back then tipped their hats at Charley's mother. He liked that, almost as much as the food the lady brought him to eat.

It did make him mad that his mother wouldn't let him eat with his fingers, but Bay-lor used a fork, so he would, too. Kind of hard to get it in fast enough, but directly his supper satisfied his belly.

While his mother talked and picked at her food, a man came up holding a piece of paper. "You the fella looking to buy land grant certificates?"

"What do you have?"

"A first class headright, good for one league and a labor."

"Could I see it?"

"Sure thing." The man handed over the paper.

Bay-lor studied it for a while, threw it on the table, then stood.

"What's your name?"

"Jones, you want to buy it?"

"No, sir. It's a fake."

The man threw back his coat, revealing a pistol tucked into this belt. "You don't know what you're talking about. Ain't no fake. Gimme it, we'll be quits."

"No, I can't do that."

The man reached for the paper. Charley slapped his hand. "Bay-lor say no."

The man drew back as if going to backhand Charley.

But Bay-lor grabbed his arm. "I wouldn't."

The man jerked away and reached for his pistol. Before he could clear his belt, the ranger jammed his fist into the man's face. The guy staggered then fell backwards.

Bay-lor stepped on the stranger's gun hand then retrieved the man's pistol and knife.

Before long, a ranger who had been on the trail with them came and pulled the man away. Charley eased next to Bay-lor and waited until he noticed him. "I like catching bad men."

Chapter

Seven

Later that night, Levi found Wallace in the same saloon sipping rot gut and holding court to a small mixed group. Mid-sentence, he stopped and pointed at Levi. "Here's the man himself. Grab a chair, Captain, and help me tell these folks about Plum Creek."

Levi shook his head. "It's late. You coming?"

"Where are we going?"

"Clarksville."

Wallace stood, staggered a step, and then found his feet. "Why didn't you shoot that thief?"

"What thief?" Levi grabbed his friend's arm and headed him toward the door.

"The guy with the fake headright."

He pushed open the saloon's double swinging doors. "Oh him. Smitty talks too much."

Wallace wiped his mouth. "So, why didn't you shoot the cheat?"

Levi didn't answer. He wasn't sure why he had let the man live. Selling fake land certificates wasn't a capital offense, but in his book, trying to pull his pistol sure was.

"So? You going to tell me? The truth."

"I don't know. Maybe I'm getting soft in my old age."

Wallace stopped, pulled back, and faced him. "I can tell you why. You're smitten by Miss Sassy."

"Get off that, Rusk. She's married." Levi grabbed his friend's arm and pushed him on down the street.

Wallace glanced around then leaned in close. "I've been thinking. I could take care of that little problem for you."

Levi didn't want to even think about Sassy not being married. She was, and that was that. He'd get her home to her husband; have a nice visit with his family, then get himself back to whatever needed to be done.

Sassy scooted Charley to his side of the bed then rolled out. She stepped to the window and stared out into the moonlight-bathed street below; a few men still moseyed around.

She looked both ways, but couldn't make out anyone. She eased to the bed and lay back down. She'd never known a man who could handle things, no matter what came his way. It pleased her that Levi hadn't killed that man.

Totally opposite, Charley probably wanted him to. She made herself close her eyes. Tomorrow, Levi was taking her home.

But instead of the lush green rolling hills and tall pines and oaks of the Red River Valley, images of her son's Bay-lor flooded her soul. She tried to force him out of her mind's eye and replace him with images of her husband, but the ranger would not be denied.

Sometime during the night's mental war, sleep overtook her. She woke the next morning with an ache in her heart. She had thought she loved Charles; he was her husband. But would she ever feel safe again without Levi around?

She wrestled with the question through breakfast, and her little shopping spree at the haberdashery. She chose a green dress and all the necessary under garments. Charley even got a new shirt and pair of breeches. He didn't like either.

The sales lady adjusted the standing mirror. "You look grand, Mis'ess Nightengale."

Sassy studied her reflection, her skin. She touched her face. Where had the young girl gone? The one who used to stare back at her from her mother's looking glass. "Thank you."

"Want me to burn the Comanche clothes, ma'am?"

Sassy started to agree, then shook her head. "No. I'll need something to wear when I wash."

Charley tugged on his new shirt. "Burn this."

She scooped him up and kissed his neck. "Be good now. We're not burning anything."

He scrunched his shoulder and wiggled. "Where Bay-lor?"

She tightened her grip; disappointed he didn't want her to tickle him. "Why do you ask?"

"Me and him catch bad men."

"Oh, so you're his new partner now, are you? What about Mister Rusk?"

The boy smiled. "Him come, too."



Levi had woken up late that morning, only ten or so cock crows before first light. He was getting old, sleeping that late.

Normally, he beat even the roosters up.

While he busied himself getting ready to head north, Wallace's offer to take care of Nightengale sent him on a path he knew full well he shouldn't be going down. He kept trying to shake the idea of Sassy being a free woman while he got himself ready then headed on out to the livery.

With two hundred pounds of grain on board and the wagon's water barrel filled, he hitched the mules then drove to the ranger station and retrieved his saddle. Thankfully the major wasn't there.

He didn't want the man to try and enlist any sort of promise as to when he'd return. No telling how long it might take to get to the Red and back. Late October wasn't the best time to start a trek across the Republic.

A beautiful time, yes. Especially traveling up through the hill country to the eastern piney woods. And the temperature should be agreeable, more warm and cool than hot and cold. Fall days invigorated him, he loved the season.

And going home always revitalized him. No place else on earth he'd rather be than the Red River Valley.

Next he drove to the mercantile, grabbed a double bit axe, a set of tools, fifty pounds of beans, and forty pounds of fat back and carried them to the counter. Then he picked out a big stack of jerked beef, fifty pounds of wheat flour, a sack of hard tack and ten jars of peaches.

At each turn he found more things he figured he needed or would be nice to take home to his Aunt Sue. Maybe he was going to have to do some bounty hunting on the way if he kept on spending money like water.

He reminded himself a little of Uncle Henry back at the Titus Trading post in '32, and the image brought a smile.

Maybe Wallace's thinking was pretty straight, and the time to settle down had snuck up on him. Might be a good idea to build a new house, plant a big garden and get a cash crop in. Wouldn't be hard with Sassy's help.

He shook his head. "Don't be a fool, Baylor. She's married." He looked around, but no one in the store had heard him.

What about Grace? He couldn't see her being too keen on farming. Maybe he ought to pick up some extra shot and powder for her dad to resell, give him a good reason to go by and look her up.

But he rejected the notion. Didn't really want to see her, and besides, she was probably married by now. The pretty ones usually didn't last long.

He finally decided he'd bought enough. If something else popped up he didn't have covered, there were a few trading posts between

Austin and Clarksville. "So, what do I owe?"

The owner bent over the counter scribbling on a little pad with a stubby pencil. He looked up. "Coin, script, or credit?"

Levi studied the man. Did he know this guy? "Do I have an account here?"

"Well, not exactly Captain Baylor, but I'd be honored to extend you credit."

Levi chuckled. "News travels fast, but that promotion's only been proposed."

"Yes, sir, but I heard that's just a formality."

Mercy, did everyone know everyone else's business in this town? "So, what's the best deal?"

"Gold, for sure, but if Houston gets his way, and we join the union, then script will be good as gold."

"How about half coin, half script, less one dollar credit."

The man stuck out his hand. "I'd be honored, Captain."

As he stacked the coins, pitter-pat footfalls turned him. Charley burst through the open door. "I found you, Bay-lor."

Levi held out his arms, and the boy jumped up into them. He caught him midair then held him out at arm's length giving him the once over. "Where'd you get the new threads?"

He threw a look over his shoulder. "She made me."

Levi followed the boy's gaze. Sassy walked toward him in a dark green dress. He swallowed hard. Wow, he just thought she looked good in her deerskins with her hair double braided.

That high collar and full skirt gathered around her tiny waist, wow. She was beyond good looking. He stepped toward her, knew he was staring and knew he shouldn't, but couldn't make himself look away. "My, oh my; green is definitely your color."



"Why, do say. Thank you ever so much, Levi." It pleased her the way he couldn't take his eyes off her. Even better she loved the feeling of security that filled her heart every time she was in his presence. She looked past him to the stack of coins and trade goods on the counter. "Looks like we've both been shopping this morning."

He blinked twice then lowered his gaze. "Yes, I've been trying to get ready for our trip. Anything you need?"

She stepped closer, took Charley, then studied his selections. "Seems like you thought of everything."

"What about you?" Levi counted the boy's ribs with a finger. "Need anything special?"

Charley wiggled down, but she kept hold of his hand. "No, you've

done plenty enough. There's no way I can ever repay you already."

He took her other hand, tugged ever so gently then lowered his head to her ear level. "You're like family, Rosaleen. Now if there's anything – growing up with Aunt Sue and Bitty Beck, I know women need lady things – tell me what, or the clerk, and I'll pay for it."

Her breath caught then came hard. Her eyes misted. She'd never liked her given name until it slipped from Levi's lips. Somehow it sounded perfect coming from him. "I... Uh, I'd love some material. This dress is fine, but besides my deerskin, it's all I've got."

"Done; pick out whatever you like. And get thread, needles, whatever." He held his hand up. "Auntie never got around to teaching me much about sewing."

She blinked away her mist then smiled at his boyishness. "That would be wonderful. Thank you."

He looked down at Charley. "Anything else? Does my little friend here need anything?"

"Oh Levi, stop asking, I don't want you to spend all your money."

"Don't worry about that." He knelt and tousled the boy's hair.

"What about it, partner? Anything you need?"

His eyes sparkled. "A long gun, powder and shot."

Levi scooped him up then stood and faced her. "What about a pistol?"

That and a half dozen other things she'd not mention, but since he offered. "I'd certainly take the loan of one if you've got an extra."

He turned to the shopkeeper. "You got any small guns?"

"Yes, sir."

"Show Mis'ess Nightengale what you've got, and help her gather anything else she might want." He pointed to the coins and paper money. "Take care of that for me until I return."

He handed Charley over. Of course the boy didn't want to go, but did. "I'll be back in a few minutes. Wallace should have showed by now. I'm serious, Rose, get anything you want."

She had no intention of imposing any more on his generosity. He strolled out and stopped just outside, looked both ways, then headed up the street.

Oh, how she wanted to run after him, go where he went and do what he did. Instead, she made herself stay and focus on the pistols the shopkeeper pulled from behind his counter.

"Did I hear Captain Baylor call you family, ma'am?"

Sassy looked at the man. "That is what he said. Yes, sir, but I was only a good friend of his sister's. That was a long time ago—before I was stolen."

"That's right. You came in yesterday, part of Bold Eagle's harem, right?"

She glared at the man. How dare him. She wanted to grab a gun and shoot him in the heart right then and there, but that'd get her thrown in the calaboose. Maybe his wrong impression was at least partially right. The war chief had three wives besides her. "The other ladies were from a band of yaps from across the Rio Bravo."

"Right, now I remember. Heard Captain Baylor killed two of them; one that held a knife at the throat of that youngest gal." He slapped the counter. "Did you hear? That 'un stole a horse in the middle of the night and lit out. Me and the boys figure she liked Injun life best."

She started to tell the man his information and suspicions were wrong, that the girl was only fifteen and pregnant, and how an old busybody told the poor little thing that no one wanted her or her half-breed baby.

It wouldn't be anything but a waste of her breath though. This guy gossiped way worse than any woman she'd ever known. The last thing she needed to do was give him more news to noise about. "Maybe some truth there."

The man nodded and held out a piece of hard candy. "Here, son, this is on me."

Charley took it. "Me and Captain Bay-lor are partners."



Levi didn't really need to find Wallace. He knew exactly where he was, but he had to get away from Rose for a while, before he made a complete fool of himself.

He strolled to the only boardinghouse in town that took script, took the stairs up two at a time, and stopped by his room. After a quick look to see if he'd forgotten anything, he stepped across the hall and went to banging on that door. "Wake up, Wallace."

After fifteen slaps on the door with his cupped hand, it opened. A bleary eyed, hung-over Wallace peered out. "Why are you making such a ruckus? Got to be lots of nice folks still trying to sleep. Some of 'em may even be sick." He rubbed his forehead.

Levi pushed the door open. "Best get to moving. Buffalo Hump and two thousand of his best braves are heading toward town as we speak."

Wallace poured some water in the bowl on his dresser and splashed his face. "You're such a liar. That's the same yarn as the last time we's in town."

"Fine. Go back to bed. If you don't want to go to Clarksville, that's your business. Forget Rebecca. She would never be one to stomach a lay-about anyway."

His friend wobbled to the only chair in the room, eased into it, then looked at Levi with pleading, bloodshot eyes. "Can I have

an hour?”

late.” Levi turned. “The south livery; a half hour. Don’t be

Chapter

Eight

Sassy hefted a small revolver. It felt nice in her hand. She looked at the shopkeeper. "What's this one?"

He laughed. "They call it a Baby Paterson Colt; shoots five percussion shots. Kind of small, though. Only twenty-eight caliber."

She must have looked puzzled because she had no idea what his description meant. "Percussion?"

"Yes, ma'am. Mister Colt's latest patent. It means that you don't have to muzzle load your powder and shot; it's a ball and cap instead. The five percussion means you can shoot five times without reloading."

"Wow, I haven't heard –" She turned the pistol in her hand with a lot more respect for the little thing. "How much?"

"I'd need five dollars on that one."

She set it down like it suddenly burned her skin. Five dollars? She'd never seen that much money in her whole life. "Which of these would be the cheapest?" She waved her hand over the small collections of pistols.

He picked up an older looking flintlock. "I could let this go for four bits."

"Fine. Put it with the rest of the things then. Where are your dry goods?"

She found a nice bolt of cloth and a used sewing kit with everything she'd need and sat both on the counter with the other items Levi gathered earlier. Rangering must pay much better than she ever thought, or maybe he just got to stock the government wagon.

She resisted the urge to count the stacks of coins and script that still lay on the counter. Twice she had to make Charley leave it alone.

"Will there be anything else, ma'am?"

"Maybe." She pointed toward a high shelf behind his counter. "That Dutch oven and a frying pan. Oh, and a couple of wooden buckets. Let's go ahead and gather those up, but put them aside. I don't see any here, but he might have some already."

"Have what already?"

She spun around; Levi stood in the door grinning. "Buckets and

cooking skillets?"

Charley wiggled free and ran to him.

He scooped the boy up. "We definitely need a couple of skillets and a Dutch oven, but I have buckets." The shopkeeper immediately went to gathering the pans and adding them to the growing pile that covered his counter.

Charley patted Levi's shoulder. "Bay-lor, buy me the Baby."

"What baby?"

The boy pointed to the small Colt pistol that still lay on the counter. "That one. Me and Mama like it."

Levi stepped closer. "You've got a Baby Paterson? What caliber is it?"

"Twenty-eight, sir."

"Do you have a thirty-six caliber, too?"

"Yes, sir, sure do." He reached under the counter and pulled out a monster revolver in its holster. The barrel stuck an inch or two out the end of the leather.

"You got plenty of cartridges for both?"

"Yes, sir."

"You got a holster for the Baby?"

"No, most ladies carry them in their hand bags."

He looked at her.

She shook her head and shrugged. "Don't have one."

"Let's fix that. And how about a shawl, and some blankets and coats for you and my partner here? It's liable to turn off cold."

"Oh, Levi, you can't. You've done so much already."

"Well, I could loan you my duster, but then I'd get cold. It is late October."

She laughed at his feeble attempt of humor, but the image of her sharing his duster with him sent her flutterbyes to tickle her tummy.

"Well, your partner and I thank you, most appreciated gentleman." She closed her eyes and dipped her head. "Surely Charles will see to it that you're repaid for all your too-kind generosity."



Wallace Rusk told himself with each headache-jarring step that Rebecca would be worth it. He knew she would. Hadn't intended to get drunk last night, but the mere thought of finally facing her – in the flesh – drove him to the bottle.

What if she didn't feel the same way about him?

One thing proved no doubt; he hated hangovers. He promised himself never again to ever touch anything stronger than sarsaparillas. Well, maybe a beer or two after an especially dusty ride, but in

moderation.

No more than three.

The decision offered a measure of relief to his constitution but did nothing to alleviate the pounding against his skull. He laid everything out on his blanket, folded it once, then rolled it tight and tied it off.

With the bedroll flung over one shoulder and his saddle bags over the other, he was ready. Images of Henry Buckmeyer flashed before his inner eye. Could have been just the thought of trying to get past that man was what really drove him to the bar last night.

It had been what? Eight years since he'd seen the colonel? Right after the battle at San Jacinto; yep, that'd be eight alright. Time sure flew. Wallace chuckled remembering the day.

Old Henry sure didn't let any grass grow before heading back home to Rebecca's mother, who according to Levi was as pretty as his love.

After one quick stop for an eye opener, he beat Levi to the livery. He saddled his horse and teetered on the verge of winning the internal debate about procuring a wee little pocket bottle when Levi and Sassy with the little boy between them came riding up.

No telling what the Captain had spent buying the covered wagon and fine looking set of mules.

"About time, partner."

Charley stood, crossed his arms over his chest, and glared. "Me Bay-lor's partner."

Wallace tipped his hat to the boy. "Sorry, didn't mean any offense; should've called him Captain anyway." He looked at Sassy. "He tell you he got a promotion?"

"No, he didn't, but the shopkeeper did."

Levi shook his head and rolled his eyes at his friend then turned to the charming Mis'ess Nightingale. "It isn't a done deal."

"Will be, Captain." He pointed a gun finger at Charley. "And you can call me Sarge!"

The boy gave him a suspicious sideways glance. Wallace laughed but wasn't sure about trekking across the Republic with the little wild man.



It pleased Levi that Wallace showed ready to leave. He locked the brake, jumped down then extended his hand to Sassy. "Care to help?"

She let him assist her down. "Sure, with what?"

He grabbed Charley, swung him up onto his shoulders then nodded toward the barn. "Come see."

He led her to the far corner then stopped. "What do you think of my new horse?"

She moved up beside him and looked in the stall. "Oh, Levi, he's gorgeous."

"A little high strung, but what stallion isn't?"

Charley patted the top of Levi's head. "Me ride him?"

"We'll see." He handed the boy over his head to his mother, grabbed the rope that hung next to the stall gate, and then stepped in.

The horse snorted and crow hopped, but Levi got the rope around his neck then over his nose. In twice the time he would have spent on his paint, he had the stud saddled.

He turned to Rose who wore a bemused expression. "What?"

"Nothing, but –"

"But what?"

"Did you choose him or just take what they gave you?"

For a moment, he didn't understand what she said meant. Then it dawned on him, "No, I bought him with the wagon and mules all together."

"No doubt he's a magnificent animal, but he doesn't look too well mannered." She closed her eyes and shook her head. "Wait a minute, what did you say? You bought the wagon and team?"

"Yes, ma'am. We needed it, so I bought it."

"When you said you procured the wagon, I thought –" She grimaced like the idea of spending so much money was repugnant.

Levi touched her arm and bent to her eye level. "It's fine, Rose. Stop worrying about the money. You and my little partner are more valuable than all I own."



It was too much. Sassy couldn't stand being indebted or coming home to Charles with such a load. It wouldn't be fair. How would she ever repay him?

"Oh, Levi, we've been such a burden to you. I don't know how, but Charles and I will repay every it all just as soon as we can."

He took her hand and patted it with his other, sending tingles straight to her heart. "The major is putting in a voucher for the paint and my pistol." He glanced at the gray. "I like the stud way better, and I've been hankering for a Paterson Colt for a while now."

"Oh, that makes me feel all better." She shot him a sassy grin.

"I can sell the mules and wagon once we get to Clarksville, and get my money back." He shrugged. "I've been blessed. Forget about the money, you don't owe me a thing. It's nothing compared to having you and Charley safe and home again."

Whatever would she have done if the Lord hadn't sent Levi Baylor to Bold Eagle's camp? "I'll try, but please don't spend any more on

us.”

He laughed patting her hand again. She shouldn't enjoy his touch so much. It would be a good thing to get home to Charles and hold his hand. But though she tried her best to remember, she couldn't recall ever feeling those tingles with any other man.

That didn't make them right, though.

The one responsible for her internal conflict brought her out of her train of thought – a good thing – and back to the wonderful event at hand. “We best be going.”



Charley hated riding in the wagon; he should be with Bay-lor. He tugged on his mother's sleeve. She glanced at him. “What?”

“Give me Baby.”

“No, I don't think so.”

“Bad man may come.”

“The rangers can handle it.”

He looked at Wallace who seemed to be dozing in the saddle then over to Bay-lor who sat the gray like he owned the world. His partner should and could own it all.

Climbing over into the back of the wagon, he let his mind wander. It went to that wonderful place where he was big and could do everything without a mother always stopping him.

He and Bay-lor rode the high plains counting coup on all their enemies. They raced across the flatlands so fast it blurred his vision. He loved being with Bay-lor.

While he and his partner hunted a bad man, he carried the Baby at the ready. His eyes grew heavy. Then the wanted man they chased changed into Bold Eagle, and Charley was no longer the hunter, but the hunted.

The cunning Indian chief followed him through a heavily wooded forest, slipping from tree to tree.

Charley looked around for Bay-lor, but could only find his mother, and Bold Eagle was slipping up silently behind her. Where was his partner? He couldn't let the chief steal her again. He had to save her.

Whooping a shrill war cry, he ran toward the one he used to call father firing the Baby. He didn't want to go back. He hollered at the Comanche. “No! No! You not steal Mama! You trade me! Stop!”

A hand shook him.

He opened his eyes to see his mother turned around in her seat peering at him. “Wake up, sweetheart.”

He hated it when tears wet his eyes. “Bold Eagle come steal you. Take back. I not want go. Him no steal you.”

She rubbed his hair turning back to her driving. “That will never

happen, not while Captain Baylor is watching over us.”

He wiped his cheeks. She was right; he was safe with the ranger. He closed his eyes again and soon rode the plains again with his partner. “Bold Eagle tried to steal Mama.”

“Did he now? Well, he better never try when I’m around. No one will ever steal your mother while I’m there. You and I will save her; we’ll protect her and always keep her safe.” He stuck out his hand. “Deal?”

“Yes, Bay-lor, deal. Me and you partners.” He broke into his Comanche, looking to his mother.

She smiled at the ranger. “As long as the sun rises in sky.”



Sassy hated it that her little boy had nightmares. How could she keep him from being tormented like she had been for so long? So many nights she relived being stolen then the beatings.

Yet, easier dreams eventually came; ones where someone rescued her and took her home again. She tried hard to remember, to see that one’s face. Had she been dreaming of Levi all those nights?

She thought back to the livery. Rose.

He called her Rose instead of Sassy. From his lips, she loved it so much better than the full name her father had given her. She’d never known another named Rosaleen.

Why Levi changed from Sassy, she didn’t know, but it made her feel softer, sweeter, more feminine. Matter of fact, everything about him, everything he did, caused her to feel that way.

And very special. It’d been a long time since she felt special.

She glanced over at him. He and Wallace rode side by side laughing about something. Would Rebecca take to her brother’s friend? How much fun would it be if she had married Levi when she was fifteen, and Rebecca had married Wallace?

Her wedding day danced across her mind’s eye. Where was Levi that day? Eighteen hundred and thirty-eight. Had it really been six years?

Mirabeau Lamar replaced Houston as president that year and started the war again with the Comanche. In ’38, Levi would have been off fighting somewhere.

If Lamar hadn’t invaded Comancheria, maybe she would never have been stolen in the first place. Politicians never took into account how their actions might affect the people.

Images of Bold Eagle’s camp replaced the Hall of the Congress. Her time with the people after she learned the language and finally stopped sassing hadn’t been a complete nightmare.

And her friendship with Honey Badger made living with Bold

Eagle and the other wives bearable. Still, every time he called her to his teepee never was. She hated him and hated being his third wife.

Why had he called her that last night, knowing she would be leaving the next day? Because he was cold and cruel, that's why. And his first wife even crueler, withholding her special tea.

The old hag hated the thought of Bold Eagle fathering any more children. Sassy rubbed her stomach. What an awful thing it would be to have his child.

The Ne'er-be-satisfied-woman's words shouted at Laura, the youngest rescued, and now, in her head, at Sassy. "Who will want you or your little half-breed baby?"

Poor girl, only a child herself. Why would she go back to the Comanche knowing Bear Fang walked with the ancestors. Maybe she intended to just disappear into the wilderness.

Sassy said a quick prayer for the fifteen-year-old. Fifteen. The same age she'd been when she married Charles. Only a child herself as well, except back then, Sassy thought she was all grown up.

Oh, the innocence of youth.



Levi stood in the saddle, but still couldn't see the fort. He glanced west, another half hour until sunset. He faced Wallace. "Going to be dark soon, what do you think?"

"Doc's Fort is way better than making camp."

"I agree; how far you think it is?"

"Why didn't you just ask? It's about another half mile."

"You sure?"

"We came this way two years ago, don't you remember?"

Levi waved him off. "I've slept since then." Hopefully nothing had changed other than the good doctor not being there. When he first heard Doc and two of his friends got themselves murdered, the news hit hard.

Almost to the yard—not that he'd stepped it off—the log structure came into view. The fort set atop the far bluff of Bushy Creek, but instead of it being the only structure there like the last time he'd been by, three dog-run cabins dotted the hillside in the fading light.

He and Wallace rode ahead. By the time Rose crossed the creek, the west gate was open and waiting. Good, he had made Fort Kenney the first day; only the Lord knew how many more days lay ahead.

Chapter

Nine

Levi nudged Wallace with his boot. "You awake?"

"What?"

He kicked him a little harder. "Are you awake?"

"Am now." His friend rolled from under the wagon, looked skyward, then pulled himself up with the wagon wheel. "The stars are still out; it's the middle of the night."

Levi handed him a cup of coffee. "It'll be light soon enough."

Wallace took the offering then looked around. "Sassy up yet?"

"No, her and Charley got a snorin' chorus going on in the wagon."

"What about breakfast?"

"I've got biscuits going."

His friend sipped his coffee looking like he was still hanging over a bit. Shortly, he drained his cup then tossed the dregs into the fire. "Guess I'll see to the mules."

After Levi got the fatback to frying, Rose stuck her head out from the wagon's back and pointed toward the skillet. "I could have done that. Still could take it over if you like."

He smiled. "We're on the verge of burning daylight as it is."

She returned his smile. "Is anyone else up?"

"I saw the Widow Kenney aways back, and Wallace is fetching the mules."

She climbed down then stepped close to the fire, clutching her shawl around herself against the morning chill. "Anything I can do?"

He resisted the urge to wrap his arms around her. "No, I've got breakfast. How about you cook supper?"

After offering her thanks again to the Widow Kenny and other folks she'd met the night before, Sassy slapped the reins over the mules' backs and pulled away from the little fort. She'd slept so soundly last night enclosed by the four eight-foot walls of the fort, and knowing Levi and Wallace stayed right there under the wagon. She loved the two men being so close.

It hurt her heart that Charley fought so hard to sleep with his Bay-lor, but she'd prevailed. She glanced behind her, the little scalawag still sawed logs. He was either full blast or a total goner; if only she could sleep like that.

Sassy whistled softly. Levi eased the gray close; she checked the boy and scooted over on the wagon's bench. "He sure did want to sleep with his Bay-lor real bad last night."

"I couldn't help but hear. Also caught some of his dream of yesterday afternoon."

She glanced back again at her sleeping baby. "I don't know what I'm going to do when we get home."

He shrugged. "Well, it's best to let tomorrow take care of itself; today will have trouble enough of its own."

She laughed. "Yes, that's right. Sure can tell you grew up with your Aunt Sue."

"Well, she said it some, but Uncle Henry's who lived it."

"I was always a little scared of him, he seemed so stern."

He laughed. "You and Bitty Beck used to giggle so much and make such a ruckus." He pointed his finger gun at her. "With Henry Buckmeyer, you'd finally run into a man you couldn't sass and get away with it."

She smiled and shrugged, maybe that was it. But she'd only been twelve that last time she got to stay with Rebecca. "Anyway, it'll be good to see them all."

"Yes, it will."

To be sure she wanted that and looked so forward to it, but even more, she wanted to scoot over, have him tie the gray to the back of the wagon, and visit with her all day. Then again, that would never do. "Didn't you say something about Mister Henry and your Aunt Sue having another little lady?"

"Yes, ma'am, I did. Four in all now." He smiled. "Mary is already eleven, Gwendolyn's turnin' ten the end of this month. Cecelia is eight, and Baby Bonnie--she's a year younger than Charley if I'm remembering all that right. They're hard to keep up with, but I think she turns four in December. Maybe five."

"Wow. Charley turns five in February, so they're like ten months apart. CeCe was still a toddler last I saw her."

"When was that?"

"At my wedding."

He looked away. "Oh yeah, sorry I didn't make that."

"Oh, don't be silly. You were busy keeping everyone in the territory safe for goodness sake." She glanced again at her son. "Anyway, I imagine they're wanting a boy, huh?"

"I'm sure."

“Will there be another fort for tonight?”

He shook his head. “No, open sky is the order, but if all goes well, we’ll be at Code Brown’s in three days.”

“Oh, so we’ve got the next two nights camping out.” She really didn’t want to hear that, but with him and Wallace under the wagon, she’d be fine.

Charley tapped her shoulder. “Me hungry.” He climbed onto the seat. “Morning, Captain Bay-lor.”

“Good morning, Partner.”

She dug out the cold biscuits and fatback she’d saved for him.



With one hand, Charley took his mother’s offering, and with the other, waved at Bay-lor. After two bites, he announced, “Me ride gray.”

The captain nodded. “Eat, you can ride with me later.”

Charley slumped against his mother. He wanted to ride by himself. But at least he liked getting to ride with Bay-lor better than sitting with his mother watching all day. He finished his cold breakfast then jumped off the wagon.

“Where are you going?”

He pointed to the clump of trees. “Make water.”

“Hurry back.”

He threw her a nod. She needed to stop treating him like a papoose. He was big now. He would show them.

Later, he rode with Bay-lor some and walked some, but mostly he had to ride with his mother. He always kept an eye out for his chance though. It came one later as long shadows covered the camp and everyone worked at chores. He eased Bay-lor’s rope off his saddle then slipped out to where the gray and Wallace’s gelding grazed.

The stallion ignored him and tore off another bite of grass. Charley tossed the rope over his neck, threaded it through the looped end, pulling it tight.

He removed the hobbles then hefted himself up with the rope. The gray crow-hopped, but Charley hung tight. He loosed the rope and tossed it over the horse’s head.

Gathering a double handful of mane, he laid his head on the stallion’s neck, then whooped his best war cry jamming his heels into the horse’s sides.

The gray bolted. Charley hollered again glancing at the camp. Bay-lor ran toward him waving his arms.

Giving the stallion his head for several strides, he nudged him with his left knee, but the horse didn’t turn. He reached for the jaw line, but had forgotten to put one in the gray’s mouth.

Though he pulled hard on the gray's mane, the horse continued galloping and went even faster. He looked behind again, but couldn't see the wagon or anyone.

Since he couldn't stop him, might as well enjoy the ride. He leaned low over the stallion's neck and whooped.

After long enough time to skin a herd of buffalo, the gray slowed, topped a short ridge, and then stopped. Below in a wide meadow on each side of a creek, more horses than Charley had ever seen before grazed.

Bay-lor's mount bowed his neck and whinnied a call to the herd. Several mares neighed an answer, and a beautiful black stallion ran to the near side of the herd, prancing back and forth. The black reared and sounded his warning.

The songs they sang to each other, he loved. Great fun. He'd seen two stallions challenge each other before. He grabbed two handfuls of mane. Sure enough, the gray stomped, reared, and then charged toward the herd.

The black, with his long, flowing mane bowed his neck, snorted, then charged out toward him.

Both horses stood face to face with their necks bowed and blew into each other's noses, but neither backed down. Charley's heart pounded. A fight! He'd made a big mistake not slipping off up on the ridge.

The black reared and pawed at the gray, who whirled and kicked. Charley almost went off the side, but tightened his grip and stayed aboard. The mustang charged then reared with his teeth bared, his hot breath puffed on Charley's neck.

The gray spun away. In the spin, he bumped the other stallion with his hip. The jolt knocked Charley sideways again, but he managed to right himself.

"Stop! No!"

He pulled on the gray's mane and kicked his sides with his heels, but the horse acted as though Charley wasn't even there. Should he jump off and roll? No, he'd get stomped before he could get away from the stallions' thrashing hooves.

What should he do? Maybe he'd soon join the great Comanche chiefs in the sky. Would they know him?

But he didn't want to leave this world or his mother or the Captain either. Not yet. He wanted to grow big and strong. Dumb horse! He kicked at the black.

"Get away! Get away now!"

The black screamed a high pitched neigh and fell back some. He snorted and threw his mane one way then the other. He reared, pawed the air, but the gray wouldn't give up and leave. He reared again and

walked on his back hooves toward the mustang pawing the air.

Bay-lor's bad horse hit the black a hard blow and almost lost his balance. In righting himself, he jerked left leaving Charley back where he used to be. But he didn't let go of the horse's mane.

Hanging on the gray's side, he tried again and again to pull himself back up. But every time he'd almost make it, the bad horse reared or spun or moved to keep him from throwing a leg over and mounting.

He didn't feel big any more.

The gray acted like he was only a feather weaved into his mane to adorn him for battle. Should Charley drop and run? Could he land on his feet?

The gray spun again, and Charley's feet flew out fanning the air. From his right, Sarge's gelding raced toward him.

Hang on he told his fingers, the ranger would save him. The gelding neared, it was his partner! "Bay-lor! Bay-lor!"

"Hold on, I'm coming." The man reined next to him then wrapped his arm around Charley. "Let go!"

It felt like he'd ripped his fingers off, like he'd left them entwined in the black mane of Bay-lor's gray. He looked at his hands as his partner raced away from the fighting stallions. It surprised him to see fingers – all ten. Baylor reined the gelding to a stop away from the fight.

His partner hugged him hard, so hard that Charley could barely breathe. Bay-lor loosed his grip enough for Charley to free his arms. He grabbed the man's neck and squeezed tight. "You save me."

Bay-lor held him close a minute then at arm's length. "Never. Do that. Again."

Charley ducked his head against the man's chest and nodded into it. He wanted to say something, but words wouldn't come, only stupid tears.



Sassy bounced across the prairie bareback on a mule with only a rope bridle. She couldn't bear to imagine the danger her son put himself in. She couldn't see, but hearing the whinnies and snorts scared her senseless.

"Please, God, please. Don't let him die. Help Levi to save him. Help him, Lord. Help him!"

The horses screamed again, but still hadn't come into view. Her heart would fail if anything happened to Charley. Finally, she topped the ridge, but the scene before her in no way eliminated any fear.

Hundreds of mustangs grazed, most ignoring the two stallions who

faced each other like two men who had enough of fighting, but neither would quit. "Oh, God! Where's Charley?"

She searched the landscape. Her eyes landed on a small still lump curled on the ground. Her stomach lurched. Her heart stopped beating. No, no! But coming closer, she realized it was only a rock. She exhaled and shook off the horror. Then she spotted him and Levi.

"Praise you, Lord! Bless You!"

Her throat relaxed. She pulled in a lungful of sweet air. The boy clung to the man's chest like the two were one. She reined the mule toward him, kicked his flanks, and slapped the ropes on the animal's neck. "Giddy up! Faster, mule."

Levi rode toward her with one arm wrapped around Charley. "He's fine."

Tears blurred her vision. She could barely make out her son, his face pressed into Levi's chest. It seemed to take forever to cover the distance to him, but the mule came next to the horse, and she scooped her baby into her arms.

She hugged him and rocked him. "What were you thinking? You better never ever do that again. Do you hear me? Do you hear me?" She burst into tears and rocked. "Oh Charley, Charley, what would I do without you?"

He wiped his cheeks and shrugged with his bottom lip quivering. "I'm sorry, Mama." His words were exactly what she wanted to hear.

"Why? Why would you do such a thing?"

"Me big, ride Bay-lor's gray." He lay his head on her chest then popped back up facing the ranger. "That gray fast, partner." He looked at his mother and rattled on in the people's tongue.

She continued to rock. "He says fast as a shooting star." She shook her head. "He absolutely has no sense of fear. Comanche taught him that." She hated the people and their ways. The boy was her world, and she'd almost lost him.

Still sitting on the mule, she rocked and cried over his head. "I'm so thankful you're alive, and I love you. But as soon as I've held you long enough, you're likely to get a good switching for scaring me so bad."

She turned to Levi, and her eyes filled anew with tears. "Thank you. Thank you so much."

He waved her off and dismounted. "No need."

She glanced down at Charley then at Levi. "He's sound asleep!" He held his arms out to take him. She smiled, leaned over, and laid him in the crook of the ranger's arm.

Carrying him over next to a tree, he gently eased him to the ground. She dismounted, and he handed the gelding's reins to her. "Hold onto this fellow for me. I've got to try to get the gray back

before I lose all light.”

He started taking the makeshift rope bridle off the mule. With her son safe, her concern fell on Levi. “Be careful.”

He grinned. “Always.”

Worried, she gazed away. On the horizon, just topping the rise, she made out a rider. “Look, look! Here comes the Calvary!” She grinned. “Thank the Lord.”

A second mule came loping up carrying Wallace. “How’s the little wild man?”

“Scalawag fell sound asleep.”

He shrugged then scanned the valley below. “There must be a hundred mustangs down there.” He smiled at Levi. “What do you think, Captain? Want to catch more than your gray?”

Levi laughed. “Not tonight.” He looked at Sassy. “You alright here?”

“Of course, but what are you planning?”

“I figure Wallace and I go on his gelding and rope my horse.”

She turned to Wallace. “Number one, what do you weigh, one-eighty?”

“Maybe, why?”

“Because I’m thinking it’d be better for me to go with Levi. You two wouldn’t have any chance of catching up to the gray if he runs. Number two, I think it’d be wise for you to just keep the saddle on that mule.

“Why’s that?”

“It’s what? Forty more pounds?” She glanced from one man to the other. “What do y’all think? It’s getting darker by the minute.”

Levi looked at Wallace who shrugged. “I can stay here and watch the boy and the mules, or go back to camp if you want, build up the fire to home in on. She’s right about one thing, it gets real dark real quick.”

“Alright then, let’s do it. You want Wallace to stay or go, Rose?”

There he goes again making her feel all soft and beautiful. She loved him calling her that. “Go; I like that big fire idea. I’ll wake Charley.”

The men tied a lead on the second mule. She sat her still-drowsy son up in front of the ranger. “I don’t think he’ll give you any trouble, but we’ll be back quick as we can.”

“He’ll be fine, don’t you worry.”

They rode off toward camp. Leaving her and Levi alone in the last of the day’s light made the flutterbyes butter her stomach something fierce. And she hadn’t even climbed up to ride double yet.

Had she connived to be so close to him? No, her plan was simply logical and the best thing to do. Either way, she had to keep her wits

about her if she was going to help get his horse back.

Could she dismiss all that buttering going on?

“Think I should ride up front to free you to rope him?”

“Sure, that sounds good.” Levi held the gelding’s reins, went to one knee offering the other as a step, and smiled. “You first. Hope we don’t regret sending that saddle off.”

Returning his grin, she gathered her skirt and used his knee to mount the gelding. “We won’t. I’ve watched the Comanche do this a hundred times.”

He handed her his lariat then hopped on behind her grabbing her waist as he settled. She handed the rope back and swallowed. Her muscles turned to mush.

Sure was glad she sat the horse because no way would her legs hold her upright. With each step the gelding took, some part of him touched her, his hand on her hip, then his chest against her shoulder.

Strength radiated from him.

Was she breathing? No. Take a breath she told herself. Remember to breathe. She closed her eyes.

“Ready when you are.”

His voice startled her and brought her from her thoughts. She blew out the breath she’d been holding, and with great willpower refrained from sounding the sigh that shuddered her core. “All right, here we go.”

She nudged the gelding into motion, acutely aware of every inch of her that he touched. Without any doubt, she should not be thinking or feeling the things she thought and felt, but waned powerless to stop, either.

Never in her life had she experienced such as she did this night on this horse in the dusky Texas hill country. And even though all dead wrong, she couldn’t help loving it.

“Go easy; we don’t want to spook him.”

Chapter

Ten

Levi held the rope end of the lasso in his left hand and the loop in his right. Could he get this done? It'd been years since he'd roped anything. The stallions stood snorting and stomping at each other.

Seemed like a lot of bluster with not much fight left. He studied the horses, but what he really wanted was to close his eyes and forget about everything but her.

She turned her head and whispered. "As tired as he looks, we should be able to get pretty close. When you rope him, I'll try to get next to him so you can get over on him. If we manage that, then maybe I can spook the black."

He put his mouth next to her ear and instead of kissing her cheek whispered, "Ease on up."

The black stared right at him for a moment. Rose stopped and let the gelding have his head. It went to grazing, and the stallion turned his attention back toward the gray.

The minute he did, she nudged the gelding forward again. This game went on until she got him within roping distance. He held the loop end out and fed more rope making it bigger.

The gelding took three more steps. Levi twirled the loop overhead. The black looked up, and he tossed the lariat. The loop hit the gray's ears, but he ducked his head. The black whirled and ran back toward his mares, whinnying as he went. The whole herd took off on the move as hundreds of hooves dug into and beat against the earth.

The gray threw his head away from the rope and galloped after the other horses. The noose fell to the ground.

He'd missed! Wallace's gelding shied and almost left him in the dirt with his empty loop, but he grabbed onto Rose and quickly regained his balance.

Mercy how he loved touching her, but he shouldn't. Why did she move him so? Why did she have to be married? If only she was free, he would –

"Oh, I'm so sorry, Levi. I don't think it would do us any good to follow them in the dark, Do you?"

Her voice startled him and brought him out of his thoughts. "Yes,

you're right. Let's head on back to camp." He gathered the lariat.

She turned the gelding around. "You want to ride up front?"

"I'm fine. You?"

"Fine, too."

He set his gaze on the starry night, and did his best to ignore the rhythm that caused her to move against him. "Ever study astronomy, Rose?"



His hands rested on her hips. His chest pressed into her back, and his broad shoulders overshadowed her being. God, she loved this man. It was so wrong, but she loved him, everything about him, his voice, his kindness, his generosity, his touch.

She loved his touch.

"What?"

"Astronomy, the stars, ever study the constellations?"

"No, never did. You talking about Taurus and Sagittarius and Gemini and the like?"

"Those are associated more with astrology, like fortune telling. Aunt Sue had brought a lot of books back from Tennessee. One was on astronomy. Some nights, I'd see if I could find the ones I'd read about."

She looked up at the darkened sky. "Can you really tell the difference? It seems like there are millions of twinkling diamonds up there. It's so beautiful."

"Actually, we can only see about fifteen hundred in a night, but it does seem like more." He pointed to the right. "See that cloudy looking line with the stars in it?"

"I do."

"That's the Milky Way, the galaxy we are a part of. We're looking from the inside of it. That's why it always looks like a band."

"Is that so?" She stared at the night sky thankful for the diversion, but when he had pointed...

"Did you know farmers are credited to be the first who studied the stars?"

She laughed. "No, I never heard that. You wouldn't suspect –"

"They sure were. The stars helped them decide the best time to plant and harvest. Then the mariners used them to sail by at night." He pointed at the dark sky. "See that one?"

"The bright one there?"

"Yes, ma'am. That's the North Star. If you can see it, you can find your way anywhere at night."

"Well, I never."

Silence followed in which she once again became acutely aware of his nearness. She closed her eyes a moment and allowed herself to dream of a different life.

The gelding topped a little ridge, and the campfire's golden light lit a small piece of the night. Something in her wanted to turn around, but to what end? Reality cared not one whit about her heart. Being married to her son's father sealed her fate.

Charley ran out to meet her, or more likely, to meet his partner. "Where Captain Bay-lor's Star Shooter?"



Levi jumped down and scooped up the boy. "He's visiting the mustangs. We'll get him tomorrow."

Rose slipped off and held the horse's reins. "You eat, Charley?"

"Yes, ma'am." He glanced toward Wallace who stood halfway between her and the fire holding the gelding's hobbles. "Sarge feed me; we partners, too."

Rose joined her son and Levi. She reached in brushing his chest with her hand and arm pulling the boy away. Levi held him tighter and turned a bit and tickled the boy.

They both laughed, then Levi released him. For a moment, she stood in the flickering firelight staring into his eyes. The little wild man wiggled until she let him down; then he ran toward the wagon.

"Uh, here." She smiled and handed him the gelding's reins then turned and followed the boy. "Where you going, Charley?"

Wallace joined him. He spoke under his breath. "So, ready for me to ride ahead?"

Levi tore his eyes away from Rose and faced his friend. "What are you talking about?"

Smiling, Wallace glanced over his shoulder, then leaned in close. "Taking care of your and Sassy's problem."

"Stop fooling about that."

"Who's joshing? I could shoot him with an arrow then scalp him. Everyone would blame the Comanche."

For a heartbeat, he entertained the notion. But as much as he might love living the rest of his life with Rose and Charley, it couldn't be built on murder. "No." He took the hobbles and kneeled.

Wallace squatted beside him. "Well, you best do something; I've never seen anyone more smitten with each other as the two of you."

All that night, Levi dwelt on his friend's words. He did need to do something. She had married, and for all he knew, Charles Nightengale might be a prince of a man.

If only Uncle Henry could advise him, or even Aunt Sue. Wallace's

only answer? Hunt the man down and kill him, and that would never do. He needed wise counsel.

The story of David and Bathsheba came to mind. King David fell hard for her and had her husband murdered. The deed cost him his baby's life, and the sword never left his house.

Even the thought of something happening to Charley sent shivers down Levi's spine. How could he be happy knowing he caused harm to his littlest partner?

Aunt Sue called God just, but as far as he was concerned, the man upstairs meted out a hard justice. Just because she had married Andrew Baylor without her father's blessing, her God took her husband's life, and in the horrible accident, Levi's dad's, too.

For a long time now he hadn't been able to remember what his daddy looked like, but he had a headful of mental pictures of the evening he died.

He couldn't be the cause of any heartache for Rose or Charley. Sleep finally found him.

In the pale light of false dawn, he and Rose gazed over his best field along the creek back home. The rows of cotton stood heavy with white bolls. An owl's hoot wove its way into his dream; she hung on his arm gushing with pride over the bounty of lint. The owl hooted again, three quick calls.

He shook off the most pleasant night vision and reached for his Paterson kicking at Wallace. His boot only caught air, his friend gone. Another hoot sounded. This one from right above him. He rolled out and eased to the wagon's back end. Rose searched the shadows.

He touched her arm; she looked at him and shrugged.

A dove cooed, followed by another owl hoot, both real close. Shortly, Wallace strolled in with the young girl they'd rescued from Bold Eagle's camp in tow. "Look what I found, Captain."

The girl must have lost five pounds from her skeleton and tucked it all away in her belly. Dark half-circles accentuated a hollow look to her eyes, and her cheekbones seemed much more prominent than he remembered.

Wallace smiled at the girl. "Had a mind it might be Bold Eagle, downright glad to see you instead. You learned a right good owl call; got a talent for it."

Rose jumped down from the wagon and stepped toward her. "Laura, what are you doing here?"

She just stood there a minute staring at the ground then looked up. A single tear escaped the corner of her eye. "I'm sorry. Didn't know where to go. Heard these here rangers was taking you home." She rubbed her belly. "Thought maybe I could tag along."

Wallace leaned in and faced her. "Where's the horse you stole?"

She glared at him. "I ain't no thief, and I didn't steal no horse. I traded for that ol' nag, but she ran off last night."

Rose took her shawl off and wrapped it around the girl's shoulders. "You must be freezing. What did you trade, Laura? You didn't have anything."

She bowed her head and rubbed her belly again. "Uh, well, see? The guy at the livery, he, uh –"

"Doesn't matter." Levi waved her off. "You're here and safe, and unless I hear otherwise, I believe you are not a horse thief."



Realization dawned on Rose seconds after Levi had stopped Laura from her confession. She should've thought a little more before asking. How insensitive could she be? What a dear gentleman to guard the girl from embarrassment. "Have you had anything to eat, Laura? Are you hungry?"

"Yes, ma'am, I am. Hadn't had nothing but a handful of berries since I lit out."

Just as the first of the sun peeked over the horizon, the girl ate the last biscuit and washed it down with the last drop of coffee. Rose sympathized with her remembering how hungry she always stayed when she carried Charley.

She would have eaten just like that, too, but first wife barely let her have enough to stay alive; a complete wonder that her baby turned out so healthy, no thanks to that jealous old woman.

Soon enough, the men had the mules hitched and underway. Rose didn't much like it that Laura sat between her and Levi, but first chance, she'd remedy that situation. Not that she should.

Oh Lord, why have you put us together? Wasn't five years with the Comanche torment enough?

No answer came, not that she expected one; only condemnation which was not only expected, but warranted, too. Loving a man who wasn't her husband couldn't be pleasing to God.

She made herself concentrate on her precious son's father. They say time heals all wounds. Surely after getting back home to Charles, she'd forget about Levi and wipe this time with the ranger from her memory. She laughed out loud.

Levi leaned forward and looked across the girl. "What's funny?"

She shook her head. "Only trying to convince myself I could do the impossible, and my cynical side refused any part of it."

"Care to elaborate?"

She thought on it a moment. If the girl wasn't hanging on every word, maybe, but most likely, better to leave such thoughts unspoken; she shrugged and grinned. "Some other time."

A mule brayed. Wallace galloped toward them, slowed the gelding to a trot when he got close, then came alongside the wagon. "They're about half mile ahead grazing both sides of that same creek."

Levi reined the mules to a stop then locked the brake. "What do you think?"

He shrugged. "You and Sassy on my gelding like last night? Except don't miss this time?"

"That's what I was thinking."

See? See what I was talking about, Lord?

She didn't even suggest it, but here it came – riding bareback with Levi again. It wasn't fair. By the same token, her insides rejoiced. Her heart beat double time, and those flutterbyes attacked her midsection with their slathering.

She could barely believe she'd be so close to him another time. Knowing full well she shouldn't, she couldn't help that she looked forward to it--greatly.

Wallace eyed the girl. "You ever drive a team?"

She cocked her head and pursed her lips. "Since I were knee high, my pap skinned a mess of mule in his day."

Levi looked at her then back to Wallace. "Why'd you ask?"

"Her mare is running with the herd; shouldn't be too hard catching her once you get the gray back. That would make three of us on horseback."

"You still thinking about cutting out a few mustangs?"

"Why not? If we were to drive them hard, then bed them down somewhere with grass and water, they shouldn't stray too far tonight. We can be at Code's before dark tomorrow, and he's likely to give a good price for 'em. We might even stay and get paid a little more for breaking 'em."

"It's a thought. Code's got that big ol' corral behind his barn." Levi looked to the girl then to Rose. "What do you ladies think?"

Rose smiled. She liked the idea of him and her riding double too much, and the rest didn't matter one way or the other to her, except.... She looked back at her sleeping son then at Laura. "Think you can handle Charley?"

She shrugged. "Don't know why not. Ma popped out six lil 'uns after me. Been wrangling babies my whole life." She looked over at Wallace. "If my mare's in that herd and y'all catch her, you gonna count her mine or yours?"

Rose glanced at Wallace then Levi, and they looked at each other. Nods went all around. Rose smiled. "If we can catch her, she's yours."

Wallace spoke up again. "On the condition we can borrow her."

"Why sure you can. She ain't much to look at, but the old gal's sound."

Chapter

Eleven

Charley's eyes popped open. He stared at the overhead canvas. Had he grown so tall that he almost touched the lodge's top? Movement pulled him back to reality.

He wasn't with his people anymore. Images of Little Squirrel and the others playing the stick game saddened his heart. Would he ever see his brothers again?

What if they came to count coup on him? Bay-lor wouldn't know them. He might shoot them dead like that yap that tried to steal his mama and Miss Laura.

His stomach growled. He rolled over then crawled to the wagon's front. "Me hungry."

She looked over her shoulder. It wasn't his mother, but the Laura lady. He climbed farther out and looked around. "Where Mama? And my partners?"

She handed him something wrapped in a cloth. "They be wrangling mustangs. Here. Ya ma saved this here fer ya."

He took the offering and went to work on the food. Didn't much care for old biscuits and cold pig, but hated hungry more. He scooted out next to the lady and stood on the seat.

Blocking the morning sun with his free hand, he scanned the surroundings. Nothing but scrubby little trees, cactus, and sharp grass, the kind a horse didn't want to eat, but would in the starving time. "Where mustangs?"

She pointed to a far hill. "See yonder? They be raising a right nice dust cloud."

He nodded and sat back down. The mules plodded along in that direction. Why didn't he notice that before? He chewed on his cold breakfast until half eaten then punched her with his elbow, handing her his leftovers. "You eat."

"Thanks."

He stood and stepped to the wagon's side. Just as he was about to jump, she grabbed hold of his britches.

"Whoa now, young'un. Where you going?"

He turned around and wrinkled his nose. "Make water."

She threw a nod behind her. "Whiz off the back. We got to keep moving and stay close as we can."



Rose leaned forward on the gelding's neck and looked to the ground. Star Shooter snorted then returned to grazing. She stayed down. Levi scooted forward, both legs touching hers.

The rope whirled through the air and landed around the stallion's neck. He froze a moment then jumped sideways. Levi slid off then wrapped his end of the rope around his waist.

She dismounted and watched him work up the rope before joining him cooing soft words to the gray. A part of her hated it that he'd got his mount back, but she didn't need to be riding double. Oh, if only she could talk to her daddy. He would know what to do.

Finally calming the stallion, Levi got an arm around his neck, and then looped the rope over his nose. She looked behind. Wallace, carrying his saddle, blanket, and Levi's bridle walked toward her. "Good job."

"Let's see how you two do getting that mare."

Levi joined her and took his bridle. "The three of us would work much better."

That surprised her. "How do you figure?"

Slipping the bridle over the gray's head, he fitted the bit into his mouth. "You and I on Star Shooter with Wallace riding flank. If she spooks, we still have a shot at her."

She nodded. She'd never jumped from one galloping horse to another, but this might be her last chance to ride with him. "Sure, we can do that."

Much to her delight, the mare didn't even flinch when she and Levi rode up. He eased his rope over her neck. Sassy slid off, untied Laura's broken rope and went to work getting his lariat tied into a halter.

Levi extended his hand. "Come on, we'll lead her. I've got some leather strips in the wagon. We can make her a bridle."

She took his hand and let him pull her back onto the gray. She leaned in close and hugged him hard then whispered into his ear. "We shouldn't be doing this."

He nodded but made no comment.

She rode for a while snuggled next to him then forced herself to scoot back even though that was the last thing she wanted to do. No matter how much she desired Levi Baylor, he was still forbidden fruit.

She had promised before God, her family, and friends to forsake all others and cling to Charles only for the rest of her life. Her whole

life.

Not her fault she got stolen. She certainly never dreamed such a thing would happen. And if not for Charley, she would have run off the first chance she got. How many times had she wished she'd only listened to her husband that morning and not decided to visit her mama?

Even though she never asked for it, she couldn't blame anyone but herself. Well, Swift Arrow and Little Beaver.



Levi didn't know what to say. She was right and should have ridden Laura's mare in. He had no business riding double. Even though Wallace rode fifty paces away, he still saw the expression on his face when she got back on with him after catching the mare.

What was he going to do? Could he just turn her over to this Charles guy and ride away? Humph, what else could he do? He didn't even have any choices. The man was her husband. That was that.

Might as well get his mind straight and quit thinking anything aside from that truth. The image of his little partner clinging to him as he tried to hand him over to a strange man cut his heart.

Would he miss Charley or Rose the most? He loved his cousins with his whole heart, and his Bitty Beck couldn't be more like a sister, but this little guy had burrowed into his soul like no other young'un ever had. Parting with his right arm would be easier.

A wild idea struck him, and he laughed out loud.

She poked his side. "What's so funny?"

He looked over his shoulder. "I had a thought, but my cynical self tickled my funny bone."

"What was it you said, 'Care to elaborate'?"

He glanced at Wallace, who seemed not to be paying attention. "Oh, just thinking about offering to keep Charley, but you wouldn't stand for that."

She scooted back close and whispered. "Earlier, I was trying to convince myself that after a while I could forget about you. Tried to tell myself that time heals all wounds." She paused a minute laying her cheek on his back. "I know it's going to be hard for Charley, too, and I'm sorry – for the both of you."

An urge to tell her he loved her—would always love her, no matter what—washed over him, to try and convince her Charles probably counted her dead and didn't even know he had a son.

He could take her and the boy south and settle down somewhere. But he shouldn't mention anything of that sort. And his knowing she harbored like imaginings only made it worse.

Even riding double was wrong. How could he profess his love?

Wallace reined his gelding closer. "Hey, Captain, Miss Sassy, the wagon is just over that next ridge, think maybe we should walk that mare."

Rose pushed back and slipped off. "You're so right, Sarge."

His friend definitely spoke the truth, but he hated the thought that they might never have a reason to be so close again. Levi and the gray sparred with the black long enough for Wallace and Sassy to cut out a nice-sized mare band from the herd and drive them out of sight.

Waiting a few minutes more, he fired three shots to set the herd on the run. Galloping, he shortly caught up. "Those mustangs may not stop until they reach Austin."

"Hope so; you best ride drag." Wallace headed to the opposite side of the band from Rose.

The mustangs acted just like he'd expected from a mare band. Wherever the lead mare took them, the rest followed. And as he figured, she wanted to stay close to grass and water. Shouldn't be hard getting them to Code Brown's trading post, but turning north and trying to take them through the piney woods would be another story.



Laura reined in the mules and put both hands up one on top of the other, the sun exactly where Captain Baylor said for her to stop, at the top of the ridge that ran along the creek and on level ground. A good spot, so she set the brake, grabbed her belly, and eased on down to the ground. Turning, she held her hands out toward the boy.

Charley waved her off. "Me no need you."

She shrugged then backed up a step.

He jumped, landed hard, found his balance, then smiled. "See? Me big."

She tousled his hair. "Big enough to help me get a fire going? I'm pert near starved."

"Me hungry, too." He ran around picking up little sticks and twigs for the kindling, bringing them back to her. "Mama and partners comin'?"

"Yes, sir, they be along soon enough. 'Fore dark for sure. We can get dinner to cookin' iffn' you'll help me."

After he gathered a good pile of sticks for her, he found an ants' nest to mess with and lay on his belly herding the tiny insects. Why did little boys always want to play with something that could hurt them? Or jump off wagons?

She rubbed her belly. A baby girl would be best, knew more about them. Better than that though would be if she could find herself a good man who would claim the child as his own.

She looked west thinking about one of the rangers. Miss Sassy had

eyes for Captain Baylor, but what about Wallace? He was funny and had himself a good job. Wouldn't be home much, but if he got her a nice piece of dirt, a mule and some seed, and helped her throw up a little cabin, she'd be content.

She rested her hand on her belly. If he'd give her a passel of young'uns, she wouldn't need much more to be happy as a gopher in a hole. She found a right nice piece of dead fall. Dragging it back, she pictured him and her together.

It could work. Wasn't as handsome as Bear Fang, or as passionate maybe, but who knew how he'd be if she could find just the right spot in his heart? The one the warrior had found in hers.

She wiped a tear from her cheek. Why'd he have to get his fool head blown off? If she'd of only knowed he was coming for her, she'd of slipped out and made her way to him.

Stupid Buffalo Hump, and the even more stupid President Houston for splitting families apart. She whacked the stick against a tree busting it in two, and put the smaller piece on the fire.

"Why you cry?" Charley stared.

"Oh, I was missing Bear Fang." She said his name in Comanche.

The boy frowned then replied in the same tongue. "No good yap."

She wanted to slap the little booger, but Bear Fang was a yap, not that there was anything wrong with gathering roots and herbs. Everyone liked meat, but you needed more than buffalo flesh to live on. She stared at the child and spoke again in the people's tongue. "You didn't know him. He was a great warrior."

He held up a horny toad by its tail. "Me better." He extended it. "Cook it?"

"I ain't cooking no lizard. No." She held her hands out and flipped them at him. "Go away and put that critter down 'fore you hurt him."

He shrugged, tossed it at her, and then ran. She dodged the reptile and batted it mid air away from the fire. Taking a step after him, she stopped and shook her head. Not worth the effort.

"You little rascal. Better be watching your back, I'm gonna get you for throwing that horned toad at me, ya hear?"

He ran and laughed. For sure all boy.

Once the fire blazed pert good, she got the beans to warming, then grained the mules, led them to water one at a time, and got their hobbles on. Halfway back to the wagon, the first mustang came into view leading a fair-sized herd; she hurried back to the wagon supporting her baby tummy.

Miss Sassy rode up on her mare. She sure seemed more comfortable bareback than Laura ever was.

"Hey, y'all done good. Gone and got yourselves a right-nice looking bunch there."

The pretty lady slipped off. "Twelve not counting your mare." She held her hands out, and the boy ran then jumped at the last minute. She nuzzled his neck. "You been good for Miss Laura?" She looked at the young woman.

"Oh, he be'd the finest kind when he were napping."

"Oh, dear. What did he do?"

"Sides throwing an ol' horny toad at me?" Laura shrugged. "Just boy stuff, ain't much worth jawing about."



Rose smiled. She knew all about the boy stuff. Before having a son, she'd only seen big brother stuff. Plenty of times, she had suffered the brunt of their high jinks, but she also gave it back as hard as she got. Then after Charley, she found out all about little boys' shenanigans.

Charley wiggled down her like he would a tree. "Captain Bay-lor!" He ran toward the man. "Me ride Shooter."

"Oh, no, you don't." Rose grabbed at him but missed, Levi scooped him up.

"Let's eat first, Partner, then we'll think about it." He tickled the boy's tummy. "You hungry, or did you and Miss Laura already eat?"

Her little wild man giggled and squirmed. "No, Partner. Stop. Me wait. Me hungry. Eat now." He climbed down and ran over to her. "Food, Mama. Get me food."

After beans, hard tack, and a nice chunk of jerky, Levi let him sit the gray while he walked the stallion down to the herd. Once the horse stood properly hobbled, the man let the boy ride on his shoulders. He trotted around in circles bouncing her baby, both of them laughing and Charley squealing, too.

Watching the two play in the last of the day's light warmed her core. She loved it. Maybe she should let Levi raise Charley, especially if Charles...no, she couldn't live without her baby.

That night Rose slept in spurts; the muscles in her legs protested each move.

But her heart ached all the more and argued the day had been too wonderful to never happen again. Never ride double with Levi Baylor; never enjoy snuggling in close to him.

Finally, she'd tortured herself enough. No way she could sleep, so she slipped out of the wagon and rekindled the cook fire.

Once the coffee smelled ready, she poured herself a cup and stared into the embers.

Maybe she should have just stayed with Bold Eagle.

Chapter

Twelve

The coffee smelled wonderful, but Levi figured he best keep to the shadows. Rose sat staring into the fire and sipped her coffee. He wanted to wipe the worry wrinkles from her forehead, but he could not offer any solace, not when duty-bound to reunite her with her husband. He had to hand her—and the boy—over to a man he didn't know, turn his back, and walk away.

If he didn't, he'd never be able to look his aunt or uncle or Bitty Beck in the face again. But how could he? He'd do anything to win Rose, but he couldn't steal her.

An image of the little Buckmeyer girls running through the house warmed his heart. What would they think of him, if he stole another man's wife and son? But watching her there, in the firelight, and knowing she wrestled with the same demons, everything in him wanted to go to her and hold her.

Laura eased out of the wagon, poured herself a cup of coffee and headed his direction. He slipped east circling around the wagon then came in from the south. "Morning, Rose, been up long?"

"A while. You?" She lifted the coffee pot with a rag and tipped it to fill him a cup.

He took it. "I don't sleep much." He laughed. "I need me a Blue Dog."

A puzzled look danced across her eyes, then she nodded. "Your Uncle Henry's mutt?"

"Well, Becky stole him away, but yes, that's the one. He's amazing. The best watch dog I've ever known."

Wallace strode into the firelight. "What about me? I ain't never been snuck up on."

Rose laughed. "Sergeant Rusk, I'd never figure you to be one who compared yourself to a watch dog."

"You must not ever been around that Blue." He winked, smiling ear to ear. "He was with us at San Jacinto, practically won that battle single pawed."

She laughed again looking to Levi. "Is he pulling my leg? Was Blue really there?"

He loved seeing and hearing her laugh. "You bet, and that dog helped us track down Santa Anna."

She warmed her hands over the fire then threw him a nod. "That's right, I remember Becky told me that you and her Daddy were in the bunch that captured ol' Santa Anna. What a day that must have been. Did y'all really holler, 'Remember the Alamo'?"

"Yes, ma'am, we sure did." Wallace grabbed himself a cup. "See, if it weren't for ol' Blue, the general would have escaped. Probably regrouped, rallied his troops, and we'd still be fighting." He grabbed the rag, wrapped it around his hand, and retrieved the coffee pot. "If I tell you a rooster can plow, just hook him up, and get after it."

"Thar ain't no way you could bust sod with no rooster." Laura walked in holding her belly, smiling, and flashing sparklin' eyes at Wallace, daring him.

"You sure?" He took her hand and helped her ease to the ground; she hung on a bit long. Levi glanced at Rose to see if she caught it.

"Well, it'd have to be a mighty tiny plow, and how'd a body make the little feller go straight anyways?"

Rose waved her off. "Oh, Sweetie, he was just being facetious. Don't pay any attention to a thing he says."

She looked from Rose then to Wallace. "So you was only funning?"

"Well now, you ladies have gone and hurt my feelings."

Levi looked at his friend. "You check on the herd yet this morning?"

"Yes, sir. Down along the creek, right where I figured they'd be."

Soon enough, Levi had them on the way. It pleased him how the younger girl stepped up and cooked breakfast and didn't flinch at seeing to the boy or driving the team.

With Wallace and Rose flanking the herd, and him riding drag, the mare band kept a steady pace through the Brazos delta. Exactly like he and Wallace figured, they drove the mustangs into Code's corral just before sundown.

The man himself closed the gate and threw Levi a nod. "You quit rangering?"

Levi laughed. "No, sir." He swung off the gray. Standing sure did ease his backside. "You buying horse flesh these days?"

"Depends." He nodded toward Wallace who walked up leading his gelding then pointed to the wagon. "Who you men traveling with?"

"Couple of ladies Houston traded the Comanche for. We're escorting them home."

"Yeah, I heard the president and ol' Buffalo Hump smoked the peace pipe. Think it'll last?"

"Hope so."

Wallace took off his hat then slapped it against his leg "So you a buyer or not?"

"Oh, I could probably give them a home at five dollar a head."

Levi guffawed. "We'll talk about how bad you're going to cheat us later. Sammie Jo cooking?"

"Yes, sir. She's got a big pot of stew on. Only two bits a bowl, ranger's special."

Levi chuckled. He'd been knowing Code Brown for the better part of six years, always exactly the same: buy low, sell high. "Let us get the mustangs settled, and then we'll see if that stew is worth its weight in gold. You got hay?"



Rose stood by the wagon and watched the men. Levi's easy manner and quick laugh impressed her. He seemed so relaxed, even though this Code guy was trying to cheat him on the price of the horses.

According to a conversation she'd overheard in the Austin General Store, mustangs were going for better than twenty dollar gold. More if green broke.

Laura eased down holding her belly. "Should we kindle a fire?"

"No, I heard them talking about stew a minute ago." She looked to the wagon. "Charley asleep?"

"Yes, ma'am. Little booger conked out right after the captain brung him back."

"Here, you can take her to Wallace." She handed the mare's reins to Laura then climbed into the wagon. She kissed Charley's neck. "Wake up, sleepy head."

He scrunched his eyes tight. "Have to?"

"Yes, we're at Code Brown's."

He sat up. "See me ride with Bay-lor?"

"Yes, I saw."

"Shooter my horse."

She scooted to the back of the wagon. "Is he? Come on."

He walked toward her. "Traded Bay-lor, him mine."

She climbed down and held her hands out. "What did you trade?"

He jumped on her, and she caught him. He wrapped his arms around her neck, kissed her cheek, then hollered. "You!"

She didn't know what to say. She could see his logic, but the boy even having the idea disturbed her. "What did Captain Baylor say?"

"Him laugh. Me say deal. Him laugh more."

She shook her head. Movement pulled her sideways. A heavysset woman dressed in a calico skirt and vest over a blue blouse straining against her ample bosom hurried toward Rose with her arms

extended.

“What are you doing standing out here? Come on in, and bring that boy. I’ve got stew boiling and cornbread in the oven.”

After introductions, Mis’ess Sammie Jo Brown led her toward a two-story log building that sat a ways from the barn and corral where the men still jawed. Laura stood next to Wallace holding the mare’s reins. The girl obviously had eyes for the ranger, but had the man even noticed?

Rose climbed the steps to the wide front porch that ran the length of the structure. Rows of shovels, hoes, and sundry other hand tools leaned against the building on each side of the double doors.

Traps, several sizes of chains, and a few furs and different lengths of rope and leather decorated the outside walls. Merchandise of so many sorts gave one plenty to look at; she could easily spend the rest of the day perusing all of it.

Once inside, the hearty simmering stew smell put her mouth to watering as the enormity of the building struck her. Sammi Jo waved toward the high rafters. Stairs led to a row of second story rooms.

“Code wanted a grand room for the tavern like one he’d seen back east. So he built it bigger than we’d ever need.” She chuckled. “We hardly ever have to use those rooms up there. Good thing, ‘cause I hate climbing the stairs.”

“Well, it sure is grand. You have to give Mister Brown that.”

Charley clung to her skirt as he first did in Austin with wide eyes scanning the enormity of the trading post. He yanked on her sleeve. “Me hungry.”

“Let me check on the cornbread, darlin’, then Aunt Sammie Jo will fix you a bowl.” She hurried toward the rock fireplace centered in the left wall. A huge iron pot hung over the coals.

Right next to that, she pulled open a black metal door built right into the rocks, revealing shelves inside. One held a big pan of what appeared to be cornbread. She grabbed a thick mitt, lifted it out, and then set it on the hearth. “Looks done to me.”

Using a long handled rod, she swung the pot out from over the glowing coals then ladled out a bowl full. She set the offering on the table closest to the fireplace. “Here you go, darlin’. And I’ll get you a piece of cornbread directly.” She looked to Rose. “You ready, dear?”

She was, but wanted to eat with Levi more. “I’ll wait for the others. Anything I can do to help?”

The lady pointed to the cooling pan. “I suppose you can cut the boy some of that if you want.”

“What do you say, Charley?” She fetched him a square of the cornbread.

He glanced up from his bowl and beamed. “Good grub.”

Sammie Jo burst out laughing, and Rose joined her. "I was thinking a thank you was in order, son."

He shook his head, rapidly devouring another bite. Shortly, as if the delicious stew aroma lured them, a half-dozen or so men and bigger boys descended on the tavern sitting at the various tables.

Scurrying, she helped the proprietress serve stew, cornbread and drinks to all, and in no time everyone ate, drank, and made merry; then she took a seat on the bench beside Charley.

Boisterous talk and laughter filled the room before Levi, Wallace and Laura came in. Her son scooted away and patted the table between them. "Captain Bay-lor! Sit here!" He smiled at his obvious hero. "Good grub!"

Rose forced herself to keep a straight face, and Levi slid in between her and the boy. "So the stew's good, is it?"

"Me like it." He took a big bite of his cornbread.

Levi leaned over and whispered into Charley's ear.

The boy sat tall. "Yes, sir. I like it."

Rose looked from her baby to the ranger, smiled then spread a napkin in her lap. "Guess he'll do about anything for his partner."

He waved a greeting at a man who just walked in then got close to her ear. "Maybe, but he drives a hard bargain."

She bumped his leg with hers, grinning. "I heard about that."

He smiled. "Seems I have to keep trading my mount for you."

If it were only as simple as him trading his horse for her. She lowered her gaze to the steaming bowl Sammie Jo sat in front of her. It smelled delicious. She willfully kept herself from bumping his leg again, from pressing hers next to his and leaving it there. Nothing about her situation was simple.

Not even proper to want him—though she did—because she married another man five years back; at fifteen, a mere child. And no matter how much Charley loved the ranger, he wasn't his son.

Oh Lord, why?

As if getting stolen wasn't punishment enough for her not submitting to her husband. She believed she'd more than paid the price for her transgression.

Why did He have to send Levi to rescue her then let her fall in love with the man? And poor little Charley would suffer, too. It wasn't fair. None of it.

The evening sped by. The food, the beer, and Wallace's entertainment telling everyone his tall tales of rough riding over the Republic proved to be a wonderful, fully enjoyed time.

She loved hearing stories about Levi, but even better, she loved him letting his friend sing his praises without adding any of his own embellishment.

And Charley? He couldn't get enough, either sitting on his Baylor's lap or standing at his other partner's knee. Once things wound down some and Charley started nodding, she stood and lifted her son onto her hip. "Where should I put him?"

Levi waved at the hostess. "Sammie Jo, where you want the ladies?"

She walked over behind the counter, retrieved a key and pulled two matches from her apron pocket. She pointed toward an opening in the far back corner from the fireplace.

"Down that hall, dear. Take one of those lamps there. Last room on the left. It'll be open, but you can lock it behind you. It's the farthest from everything." She laughed. "Liable to get noisy later."

"Thank you, ma'am." Rose accepted the key and lucifer then nodded toward the girl. "You coming, Laura?"

"Yessum, I s'pose so." She stood and turned toward Sammie Jo. "Where are the rangers gonna be sleeping?"

She shrugged, eyeing the girl hard. "They usually stay in the first room. Why you asking, sweetie?"

"Uh." She supported her abdomen with one hand and rubbed it with the other. "Well, my pap says a body best know where to run when the bear comes knocking."

"You can rest easy 'cause me and the mister will be right across the hall from you ladies, so you won't have far to go if any need arises."

Laura hung her head. "Yes, ma'am." She headed for the bar. "Here, I'll carry the lamp for you, Miss Sassy."

Being around the young woman, she couldn't help but like her. Smiling at the puzzled expression on her hostess, she shook her head. "My nickname."

The woman nodded understanding. Rose followed Laura down the hall and at the door, gave her the key. Didn't say a word until she laid the boy down then pointed to the far side of the bed. "Will that side be alright for you?"

"Yessum." The girl walked around the bed, pushed on it once, then eyed Rose hard. "I ain't set my bonnet on the Captain, if that's what you and that Sammie lady was frettin' over."

She smiled. "It's obvious you've got eyes for Sergeant Rusk, Laura, but slipping into his room in the middle of the night is not how you go about winning a man's heart."

Laura rubbed her belly. "I ain't got a lot of time."

Rose didn't want to think about the future. "Pull up that chair over there, and let's you and me have a little talk."



Wallace hated to see Rose take the boy and girl to bed. He loved having an audience that hung on his every word, made his yarn spinning twice the fun. He toed Levi's boot. "What say we hang around here a few days and bust them broncos?"

"We could do that. I heard Code talking to that feller by the bar about them, bragging like they'd been trained to do everything but plow."

"How much extra should we charge?"

"We can ask ten, but he's not going to pay more than five."

"Twenty a head, plus even five for breakin' 'em would be three hundred total. Think he'll go for that?"

Levi shrugged. "Nice number, but two fifty's probably more realistic."

"Well, I'd say that's the bottom. We can take 'em north with us if he don't get right and make it enough for our trouble."

Levi stood. "Let's hit the sack. If I'm busting broncs tomorrow, I need my beauty rest."

Once settled, Wallace put his hands under his head. "Tell me again how pretty that Rebecca of yours is."

"She's twice or three times as good looking as Laura, and she's not pregnant."

"Prettier than Sassy?"

"My Bitty Beck is so beautiful, aren't words enough to describe her. Now go to sleep."

How he wished he could. He hated that about Levi. The man could close his eyes and be gone in five winks. Not him; he couldn't remember the last time he just dozed off.

Well, that time when they'd been chasing Buffalo Hump to the coast, and he hadn't sleep for a week. Once that little shindig was over, he fell asleep sitting at the supper table.

Most times, though, getting unconscious was hard work.

Why'd that Laura girl have to go making eyes at him? Then right out asking Sammie Jo where he would be sleeping, like she wanted to come calling later. The little gal was cute in her own way, but sure enough carrying Bear Fang's papoose. Instant family wouldn't be so bad, would it? Wasn't like the buck would ever show up wanting his baby—or the girl.

And it hadn't been him that blew the old boy's brains out. Little booger wouldn't even have to know it was his Uncle Levi that made him an orphan.

Chapter

Thirteen

Next morning before the sun, Rose found Levi and Mister Brown in front of the fireplace sipping coffee. “Where are the cups?”

Brown pointed to the bar. “Yonder, under the counter.”

Rose retrieved one, filled it, then sat next to Levi closer to the fire. “You ever sleep?”

“I tried it once, but this Comanche snuck up on me. Like to have got my hair lifted.”

She banged him with her knee. “You been hanging around Wallace Rusk too long.”

Her host laughed. “Isn’t that the truth?”

“Well, I don’t know about that, but what I do know is breaking those mustangs has got to be worth more than three dollars a head.” He looked to her. “What do you think, Rose?”

“Me? Why, I wouldn’t do it for any less than ten.”

“See, even the pretty lady knows you’re trying to skin us.” He winked at her.

Shaking his head, Brown looked skyward. “Y’all are ganging up on me. Fine then, three and two bits.”

Levi kept at his game intermittently through two more cups of coffee, then stood and extended his hand. “Two hundred seventy-three, and four bits in coin, plus three days’ room and board.”

Brown grinned. “Two seventy even, coin and script, and I’ll throw in the three days’ room and board while you break ‘em.”

Levi kept his hand out. “Two seventy-one and six bits coin only, four days, and you have Sammie Jo roast a shoat while we’re here.”

“You speaking for Wallace?”

“Don’t I always?”

Brown stuck out his hand. “Deal then.”

The men shook on it. Rose exhaled; she loved the idea of staying four extra days. Pulling the coffee pot back from the fire, she swirled the dark liquid, then faced Brown. “Seems to be only dregs. Where’s the makings?”

He pointed at the empty bucket. “If you’ll fetch some water, I’ll get the coffee.”

Levi stood. "I'll help you. Code's well is deep."

She and her ranger walked out into the first light of day. She wanted to latch hold of his hand and skip like little kids, but knew better. The well, halfway between the tavern and barn, stood waist high built out of rock then roofed. He took the bucket from her, tied it off, and then lowered the well rope.

She turned around and leaned against its rock wall. "You really think I'm pretty, or were you just saying that?"

"No, you are one handsome human being. I could look at you for a month of Sundays and never get tired of your face, those green eyes, or that hair of yours."

She studied the almost full moon as it sunk into the west. For a few minutes, she marveled at its beauty, then a horrible thought struck her. She spun around and faced him. "How long has it been?"

He kept on cranking the rope and chuckled. "Since when?"

"You rode into the Bold Eagle's camp."

He retrieved the bucket. "Oh, let me see." He looked off then back. "I'd say twelve days ago, give or take. Why?"

She shook her head doing some quick mental math. Whew, she hadn't even thought about it. Should she tell him? Heavens, no, there wasn't even anything to tell.

It would be a good idea to get a few things from Sammie Jo though for when her time came. She pulled her thumb over her shoulder. "The moon's almost full."

At first his face went blank, then he smiled. "What has that got to do with anything?"

"Seems someone once said it was best to break a horse under a full moon. You ever hear that?"

"No, ma'am, can't say that I have."

She studied his eyes and smiled, proud he hadn't guessed her mind. Besides, no way could she be pregnant. Still, the first wife withholding that special tea haunted her.

I'll see you no more after today, she'd said. And Ne'er-be-satisfied's hateful words rang in her ears; no one would want her or her little half-breed. She shook away the unpleasant and fearful thoughts.

"So when are we going to start breaking them?"

"We? There's no we that includes you. Wallace and I will see to it."

"Levi Baylor! I have been busting broncos since I was nine years old. I have a gift for it, or haven't you heard? Everybody back home knows it. Why don't you?"

"Well, maybe I heard something about it, but you were dealing with tame stock. Ever sit a mustang?"

“No, but a horse is a horse.”

He lifted the full bucket up to the wall's edge then hefted it to the ground. “After you, my lady.”

She put her hands on her hips and glared. What made him think she wasn't perfectly capable of helping break those mustangs? “You are not getting away with this so easy.” He just shook his head, smiled, and started walking toward the tavern. “Grin all you want, but we're not done with this conversation, mister.”

She tried to stay mad at him through the second pot of coffee and breakfast, but just couldn't. He only wanted to keep her out of harm's way. She liked that enough, but still, working with the mustangs would be a nice diversion. Lord knew she needed to get her mind off of what awaited her back home.

Shortly after Wallace joined them and Levi filled him in on the deal's details, little footfalls echoed down the hall and pulled her attention to the back of the tavern.

Charley burst into the room and ran toward her. She held her arms out, and he jumped. “Me miss you.”

“I missed you, too.”

He kissed her cheek hard then wiggled down and faced Levi. “Me ride Shooter now.”

Levi smiled. “I, partner. Call yourself I.”

The boy nodded. “I ride my horse now.”

“Maybe later. After you eat.”

His shoulders slumped. “Fine. Me eat now.”

She started to correct him, but decided to let it go. He had plenty of time to learn the King's English. “Did you hear we're staying here for a few days?”

Charley looked up. “Why?”

The ranger clapped once then rubbed his hands together. “Mister Brown bought the mustangs, and Sarge and I are going to break them.”

The boy threw his shoulders back. “Me, too?”

Levi laughed. “Maybe some, after we knock the rough off.”

Charley looked to his mother. “Me and my partners are breaking them mustangs.”

“Yes, I just heard.” She glared at Levi. “So he can help, and I can't?”

He held both hands up in surrender. “Fine, you can help, too.”



Laura paused at the hall's end, reminded herself not to slump or waddle, pinched her cheeks red, then strolled into the tavern's grand room wishin' she fit into their little group better.

Wallace sat with the other three chatting over coffee. She hated the nasty stuff. Easing into the chair next to Rose, she waited for a break in their conversation.

“Y’all planning on leaving this morning?”

Levi shook his head. “No, we’re going to hang around a few days and break the mustangs. Made a deal with Code on them.”

She looked from him to Wallace then back. “Well then, think it’d be alright if I begged a needle and some thread? This ol’ dress seems to be gettin’ snugger by the minute.” She laughed, half wishing she hadn’t drawn attention to her growing belly.

“You sew?” Miss Sassy seemed surprised.

“Don’t everyone?” She looked at the rangers again. “Well, women folk anyways. Guess I throw a middling stitch. Pap let me skip hoein’ if I were sewing.” She looked her new friend in the eyes and smiled. “I’m good at a few things.”

Sassy stood then hugged Laura’s shoulders. “Of course you are, I didn’t mean –”

“No, I were only saying.”

“Well, I’ve got thread and needles out in the wagon. Levi bought ‘em for me ‘fore we left Austin. Meet me in the barn after breakfast, and I’ll get you whatever you need.”

“That’s mighty kind of you, Miss Sassy.”



Not too long later, Levi sat on the corral’s top rail with the boy on one side and his mother on the other. Out in the middle, Wallace kept his head down as he slipped toward a bay colt on the edge of the band. “Easy now, boy.”

“Why he’s going after that one? I’d catch that filly there first.” Rose pointed toward a nice sorrel.

“We like to start hard then work our way down.”

“That’s smart. Other than the lead mare, that guy does looks the rankest.”

“That’s what we thought. Glad you approve.”

Wallace neared and threw his loop over the colt’s head pulling it tight on his neck. The mustang jumped and tried to run. The ranger wrapped the rope around his waist and leaned back.

The colt made two turns around the corral. Wallace worked him to the center post. In no time, he tied him short. Levi slipped down, grabbed his tack, then joined his friend.

He handed his bridle to Wallace first then threw the saddle over the colt’s back. “Seems to me he wants to go left.”

“Could be, but you can’t sit this one.”

Levi tugged on the cinch strap. “Two bits says I can.”

“Why not? I like easy money.”

Levi waited for the colt to blow, then tugged the girth tighter.

“That should do it. Blind him.”

Wallace wrapped his bandanna over the horse’s eyes, took off the rope, then doubled it back over his neck. Levi swung aboard. “Let him go.”

Wallace pulled the rope and bandanna off in one motion. The mustang stood there for a heartbeat then jumped left, exactly like Levi thought. He crow-hopped twice then twisted left.

He ducked his head and kicked. Levi spurred him, and he bolted. He plow-horsed him away from the rail. For sure, he didn’t want him trying to jump it.

For several trips around the corral, the colt raced then stopped and went to bucking. He’d run then buck, run then buck. But each time around, the young horse wasn’t going as high or bucking as often.

Levi spurred him again, but this time he only loped. He pulled the colt to a walk then eased toward where Wallace sat between Rose and Charley. “What was it you were saying a minute ago?”

“Nothing. Let me have him, and you go catch me that mare.”



Rose eased from the fence onto the colt’s back. Wallace looked back at her. “What are you doing?”

“Oh, I just thought I’d work him some while Levi’s catching the mare.”

Charley waved. “Me get to ride her?”

“I don’t know about that, little partner. We might want to save you for that young feller over there.” Wallace nodded toward a colt that looked to be coming two. “He’s maybe more your size.”

Charley puffed his chest and threw his chin out. “Me ride anything.”

The ranger looked from him to his mother. “About the truth. Bold Eagle had him riding before he could walk.”

He shrugged then motioned toward the mare Levi was putting the sneak on. “Might want to see if you can help him, Sassy. Captain ropes like an old woman.”

“And you might be surprised what some old women can do, Sarge.” She cocked her head and raised her eyebrows at him then plow-horsed the colt toward the herd. She nudged the animal’s ribs.

At first, he didn’t move.

Kicking him a little harder, she clucked. He crow-hopped once, and she pulled hard on his right rein. He stopped hopping and went with her. Pulling him back straight, she tickled his ribs again, and he

eased forward.

“Good boy.” She patted his neck. “Easy now.” She spoke in the low singsong voice horses seemed to respond to the best. She leaned forward on his neck, then as the colt walked into the middle of the herd, she eased him toward Wallace’s mare.

Levi winked at her, took two steps, then threw his lasso right over the mare’s neck. About as fast as Wallace tied the colt to the center post, Levi had the mare ready.

Riding back to the rail where Charley still sat, she stopped and dismounted. “You Mama’s good boy?”

Never taking his eyes off the rangers, he nodded once. Sarge swung into the saddle. “Sure. Me want next turn.”

She understood exactly, she wanted a turn, too, but also knew why Levi didn’t want to let her, and no way was she going to allow Charley to ride one of the mustangs before at least green broke. “We’ll see.”

“No see; me ride.”

Wallace tucked his chin. “Let her go.”

Levi jumped back, and the ranger rode her through more bucks and turns and crow-hops than the colt provided, but she didn’t run as much. In the end, he had her under control.

Levi leaned against the rail watching his friend then glanced at her. “Well, he managed to hang on. Two down, ten to go.”

She smiled, resisting the urge to jump off the rail into his arms, daring him to catch her. “What do you want me to do with the colt?”

He shrugged then looked to Charley. “What about my partner here? They ready for each other?”

The boy glared a little. “Me stay ready.”

Rose had to laugh; where had he heard that? “If he stays in the corral.”

He held his hands out. Charley jumped into them. “Nothing fancy, deal?”

“Deal.”

By evening, the rangers had half the mustangs broke to ride while she and Charley worked on reining the first four. A fun day, but she couldn’t stop thinking of what the full moon had reminded her about.

Could she remember exactly how far along she’d been when she realized Charley was on the way? Those times blurred, and she really didn’t want to dwell on them.

The next day proved even better. Just like Levi said, start hard and end easy, so logical. The men busted the last broncos way before sunset. Once she heard Sammie Jo was getting a shoat ready to smoke, she turned the finish work over to Charley and his two partners.

If she couldn't have her mother to talk to, she'd take Mis'ess Brown. She found her behind the tavern at the smoke pit built from beautiful native rock and some real heavy-looking cast iron.

"Need any help?"

Sammie Jo looked up from her dressed shoat. "Y'all already done with those mustangs?"

"Oh, they're still working on finishing them, but the rough has definitely been knocked off. Charley's helping them, too. You seen Laura?"

"She's been holed up all day sewing." She slathered a brownish concoction over the pig. "Mighty kind of you to provide the cloth for her." She smiled. "I saw your boy riding earlier; he sits a horse like he's born to it."

"Yes, ma'am, he does. My father and his before him were horsemen. Guess you could say it's in our blood."

"Here, take this." She handed her brush and bowl to Rose then stuck two big forks in the shoat and turned him over. She took the brush back and slathered the other side. "How long have you known Captain Baylor?"

Rose held the bowl out as the lady brushed on more sweet-smelling sauce. "Since I was just a girl. His little sister, or to be exact, his cousin is only a few months older, and we were best friends coming up."

"You in love with him?"

Rose nodded. This lady didn't mince her words. "Yes, ma'am, I am."

"What about Mister Nightengale? What's he going to say about that?"

"I have no idea. Far as I know, he may count me dead, and he never even knew I was pregnant when I got stolen. Happened over five years ago. "

"Well, I haven't known Levi Baylor that long, but long enough to know he's a good man. Hadn't ever stood for me talking about the Lord with him, but saved or not, the ranger has a good heart. I don't want him killing some man over his wife."

Tears welled. "I don't either."

"Good." She set her brush down. "Then what are you planning?"

She shook her head, willing herself not to cry. "Don't know. Haven't got any plan. I don't have any idea what I'm going to face or what I'm going to do. I can tell you that it's going to break mine and Charley's heart if—when—that man rides out of our lives."

"What about a divorce? Tell Levi you want to go back to Austin and file the papers. You can leave the boy with us, and you two could be back in no time."

“Oh, much as I would love that, I can’t. I stood before my family and friends, and even more important, vowed to God I’d love and honor my husband, forsaking all others when I married Charley’s father.”

Sammie Jo shook her head. “You best think of something. I’ve never seen a man more in love with a woman as Levi is with you.” She placed the metal lid over the pig. “He’s not going to be able to let you and that boy go, no matter what he says. The heart wants what the heart wants, and the brain hasn’t got a lot to say about it.”

Chapter

Fourteen

More in love than any man she'd ever seen. That's what the woman had said. From the tavern's porch, Rose stared at the moon as it sank toward the western horizon.

She'd slept a little sometime after midnight, but woke too soon with Levi on her mind and quit trying to go back to sleep hours ago.

While she gazed at the harvest moon, a line of dark gray clouds peeked over the tree line. She watched for a while then the wind picked up out of the west.

Wrapping her shawl tighter around her shoulders, she shivered once, then decided to find a place by the fire.

Levi kneeled on the hearth stirring the coals. He looked up when she came in. "Where you been?"

"I was out on the porch. Didn't know you were up."

He held the coffee pot toward her. "Want to help?"

She pulled her shawl tighter. "Sure." Then she looked past him. "The bucket got any water?"

It did, and soon enough he had the fire going, and she had water and coffee in the pot hanging over the blaze.

"So." He pulled a chair close and offered it to her. "What were you doing on the porch?"

"Oh, just watching the moon. Thinking."

"What are you thinking on?"

"Oh, I guess mostly about you." She sighed and shrugged. "About us."

He leaned back in his chair letting the two front legs come off the plank floor. "I've been doing a lot of that myself."

"Looks like a storm is going to blow in."

"Is it now?"

"Coming out of the west though, shouldn't be too cold."

His chair flopped hard on the floor then shook his head. "What about us, Rose? What have you been thinking?"

She looked at him. "Levi, I wish I had an answer, but I just don't know. I mean, I thought I loved Charles, but I was only fifteen when I married him." She closed her eyes and shook her head then looked up.

“I know for sure I love his son.”

She smiled. “But for the life of me, Levi Baylor, I do not know what to think about us. I can tell you I’ve never felt like this about anyone else I ever knew.” She ducked her head. “Not the way I feel about you.” When she looked up, his eyes seemed deeper than any well.

“Know what you mean. Sammie Jo thinks we ought to light out for Austin and file papers, said she talked to you about it.”

“She did.”

“She also said you wouldn’t hear of it.”

Before she could say anything, the front door blew open. The room’s temperature dropped a good fifteen degrees. The wind swirled through the grand room and enveloped her heart.

He jumped up and closed the door, making sure he latched it then retrieved a couple of split pieces from the firebox and put them on the fire.

Waiting until he sat back down, Rose leaned forward. She wanted to take his hand and tell him everything was going to be fine, but she couldn’t. Because it wasn’t. How could everything ever be fine again? “I can’t divorce him, Levi.”

The words appeared to pierce his soul. “Why not?”

“Above all the many other reasons, there’s God.”

“What’s He got to do with it?”

“He hates divorce.”

Bless Levi’s heart. He leaned in and extended his hand. She took it. He looked into her eyes. “You’re right, Rose. I know you are. No matter how much I love you, we can’t build a life on another man’s heartbreak.”

“What are we going to do then? It’s so impossible.”

“I’m taking you to Uncle Henry and Aunt Sue’s. I don’t think Charles would understand – or he’ll misunderstand – if we were to show up together at his place.”

“Hadn’t thought about that. You may be right.”

He sighed. “And I don’t think I could stand to just... just....” He turned away and faced the fire. The silence between them widened a separation more than any chasm could. He turned back to her. “I can’t just drop you and Charley off and ride away. It’ll be hard enough watching Uncle Henry take you two to him.”

His eyes filled with tears. Hers did as well. He pulled his hand away, wiped his cheeks, then walked to the counter and retrieved two cups. She hooked the bar holding the coffee pot and swung it out grabbing the pot with a holder.

Both cups filled, he sipped his coffee and stared into the fire. She wanted to hug him, make the pain in his eyes go away, but that

certainly wasn't the answer. A heavy gust rattled the windows then the silence that followed only thickened.

Finally, he drained his cup. "If ever you or Charley need me, doesn't matter where I am or what I'm doing, I'll come."

She hated thinking about a life without him near, without him protecting her. She swallowed hard. "I'll remember that."

For the longest, while the storm blew in, she stayed there with him. Neither saying anything, for there were no words to speak, no plans to make, no future. Not for her and Levi.

Slowly, the place came alive. One after another drifted in; Laura in her new dress looked so nice. Food was prepared and eaten. More coffee got made and drunk.

Words were spoken, but not by her to him or him to her. Those words lay on the plank floor already said and dead. They could never be taken back, no matter how much she wanted things to be different.

There would be no 'us' when it came to her and Levi.

The storm blew in harder and colder than expected. After half a day of cold drizzle that turned to colder sleet, everyone decided it was the first Blue Norther of the season.

That evening, Sammie Jo served her smoked pig. Everyone, especially Charley, raved about it, but Rose couldn't enjoy it. She didn't know if she'd ever enjoy anything else again in the whole of her life.

Lord, have mercy on my soul – and my love's.



Levi made himself breathe and move and even speak when spoken to. And maybe because of the cold or that he hadn't slept any the night before, he managed a solid six hours of dreamless sleep that night.

The next morning broke colder. After the necessities, he made his way to the barn, careful to dodge the worst of the mud and ice. Wallace already worked graining the stock.

The man looked up then shook his head. "Well, look what the cat drug in."

Levi took the bucket from him. "You're right about that. No dog wants me."

"Well, I don't know, Captain, but you ask me, it sure does seem like you and Miss Sassy are borrowing a heap of trouble."

Sinking the bucket in an open tow sack, he scooped it almost full then pulled it out. "Where'd we get this wheat?"

"Code had it."

"What did you say?"

"Code had it, or about you and Sassy borrowing trouble?"

"The latter." He looked at his friend. "How you figure?"

"That Nightengale fellow that you refuse to let me take care of, isn't he in the logging business?"

"I think that's what Rose said. Leastwise he was five years ago."

"There you go. Lumber jacks die all the time, and if a tree hasn't fallen on him by now, he's probably up and married again. Might even be daddy to two or three other little kids by his new wife."

"Wouldn't that be great?"

He took the bucket back. "Could be, once you get her there, he doesn't want her or the boy. You and her best look on the bright side and start enjoying life, or I'll have to shoot you both dead."

"Oh yeah?"

He shrugged. "Charley and I can make it just fine, especially if Rebecca is as pretty as you claim."

Levi stared at his friend. He hated admitting it, but the sergeant made sense, especially the part about Nightengale not wanting her anymore. He had been borrowing trouble.

The man might have gone and got himself killed. Pilgrims got themselves planted every day in Texas. "You're right, my man." He looked around. "What still needs to be done?"

Wallace waved him off. "I've got this. Go on and see what Sassy is about this fine morning."

"Thanks. Believe I will."

Other than Sammie Jo, the tavern remained empty. He grabbed a cup of coffee and joined her at the bar. "Seen Rose this morning?"

She looked up from her dish drying. "She's out back, should be in soon enough."

"You outdid yourself with that shoat."

"He was tasty, wasn't he?"

"Yes, ma'am. Care to share your sauce recipe?"

She laughed. "We've had this conversation before."

"I know, but I keep hoping."

She spread her towel over the side of her number two wash tub. "You want some breakfast?"

"Rose eat yet?"

"No, and I'm not hungry." He spun around. She stood just inside the room.

"Care to keep me company while I eat?"

"Sure, why not?"

Facing Sammie Jo, he circled a finger in the air. "I'll take whatever you got and lots of it if that shoat's involved."

Before he could get it for her, Rose pulled a chair close to the fire. He joined her then reached over and gently lifted her chin. "Wallace

thinks we've been borrowing trouble."

"How so?"

"Well, he thinks even if Charles is still alive, that he's probably gone and got himself married again. Might have kids."



Rose closed her eyes, not sure she wanted to entertain any hope. "Why wouldn't he be alive? And how could he get married again when he's married to me?"

"Wallace pointed out that logging is a dangerous profession. That's how my dad died. But he also said something that I hadn't thought of, because to me, it makes no sense."

She leaned in, a little ray of hope shined into her soul. "What did he say?"

"That even if he is alive, and isn't married again, he still may not want you and Charley."

She shook her head and sat back a bit. "Why wouldn't he want us?"

"Think about it. You were Bold Eagle's third wife for five years."

Her hand went to her mouth, like she didn't even want to say it herself. What if Charles didn't want her? Would that change things? "How would that work, if he refuses to take us back?"

"I don't know, but I can get a lawyer if need be. Who knows? He may have already divorced you or got an annulment or even had you declared dead." He smiled. "But Wallace is right. We have been borrowing trouble."

Hope, he offered her hope. Maybe everything would work out. Bless Wallace Rusk's heart. Oh, what a wonderful thing hope was. "Hey, Sammie Jo, I'll take some of whatever you're fixing Levi."

After maybe the best breakfast she'd ever eaten, Rose filled their cups then sat next to him. "What are we doing today?"

"If it warms up, want to take the lead mare and that biggest colt out on the trail?"

"Sure, should we let Charley go?"

"He could ride that bay filly; she's the best natured of the bunch."

Like Texas was want to do after a Blue Norther, with the sun finally showing again, the temperature rose faster than bloodweed in the cotton patch. Rose loved it. Levi and Charley rode on either side of her.

For most the afternoon, the mustangs did as asked. Not until she stopped the mare at the corral gate then turned her back did the old girl crow-hop and swing her head around as if saying, 'Enough's enough.'

Yanking her head back, Rose dug her heels into the mare's rib. The mustang bolted then jumped high and landed hard. She shook

once then kicked and twisted all in the same motion. Rose squeezed her legs tight and went with the old girl.

Charley whooped his best war cry.

Levi whooped. "Turn her, Rose."

To stop the mare's temper tantrum, she could pull her into a tight circle, but she decided instead to show her who's boss. The horse bucked herself out, then Rose took her back to the gate.

She reined her away again. The mare went with her without any protest, so she took her again. Twice more, she repeated the process, then the last time, swung out of the saddle and patted the mare's neck.

She looked up. Levi and Charley both wore the biggest grins she'd ever seen. If only this day could last forever, her life would be perfect.

Chapter

Fifteen

Laura pulled the thread through, tied it off then held the shirt out. “Don’t look half bad.”

She folded it over then hurried to the grand room. Wallace sat at the bar with two men she’d not seen before. With the shirt behind her, she remembered not to slouch or waddle and strolled up next to him.

The man kept on talking, so she waited. Her pap didn’t truck with children interrupting grown men.

The taller of the two strangers obviously noticed her and smiled.

Wallace turned around. “Hey, Laura, did you need something?”

She held out the shirt, searching for the exact right words. “I made it. Miss Sassy give me the cloth and thread.”

“Well, how about you.” He reached for it, but she jerked it back.

“No, it ain’t done. I need to fit it – won’t take long – if I can borrow you for a shake or three.”

The shorter man bumped Wallace with his shoulder. “Who’s your friend, Sarge?”

Wallace looked from her to the man. “This is Laura; she’s under mine and Captain Baylor’s protection.”

The man shrugged and politely nodded at her. She liked the ranger saying straight out that she were under his protection. She liked that a lot, and loved the way the stranger backed down, ‘cause it seemed he might be about to josh the ranger over her. She touched his arm, and Wallace looked back to her. “I’ll be in my room, if you get a chance directly.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He smiled. “I’ll catch up with you.”

She returned to her place and laid his shirt out on the bed. Taking her seat next to the window, she went to working on a miniature version for Charley. Miss Sassy had said the boy would love having one made out of the same material as his partner.

Laura chuckled to herself at the thought of the young’un. Him wanting her to cook that horned toad then throwing it on her brought a smile. She rubbed her belly.

She’d gladly take a boy if he could be like Charley, but really hankered for a girl. Once the evening’s light faded, she lit the coal oil

lamp and changed seats.

A knock on the door pulled her from her work. "Laura, you in there?"

She jumped to her feet and opened the door. "Yes, sir, come on in."

Wallace looked down the hall then stepped inside the room. "So, here I am."

"Yes, you sure are." She grabbed the shirt and held it up to his chest. "Seems pert near right. Skin that one and throw this 'un on for me."

He did as told. She made herself look away, not stare at his bare chest. Sure did have lots of muscles. "If you ask me, feels like a right nice fit. What do you think?"

She turned around, stepped back, and studied her handiwork. "Reach out."

He did. Right tempted to walk into his embrace, she kept her place and marked the sleeves then tugged on the shirttail and marked where she wanted the hem.

"Yes, sir, that'll do right nice. I'll finish it for you by the mornin'."

He took the shirt off and put his back on then turned toward the door.

She bit her lip then blurted out just as his hand touched the handle. "Miss Sassy says your lovin' on the Captain's little sis."

He turned back. "She say that?"

"Sure did. Claims you been hankerin' after her for a spell now even though you ain't never met her."

"Guess she's right. Been hearing about her for years." He smiled.

She ducked her head then hugged her belly. "Iffin it don't work out for you, Wallace, I'd, uh, well I'd –" She looked up and met his eyes. "Me and the babe here, we'd be right pleased to see you come callin'."

He stepped close then took her hands into his. "I'll keep that in mind."

She peered deep into his eyes. He was such a good man. "If lightning was to strike, and us'uns got hitched, I'd be the very goodest wife you ever seen."

He laughed. "I'm sure you would."

"Get me and the babe a roof, and a piece of ground to work, and you could keep on rangering or whatever you want. Come and go."

"I see."

Shrugging, she smiled, ducked again, and squeezed his hands. Looking back up, she grinned. "I'd probably need a baby ever year or so, but that weren't no hill for a stepper like you."

He ducked his own head down to her level and squeezed back. "If

that lightning did strike – now I don't want to lead you on, but if it did – we would do it right.”

“That’s be grand.”

Easing his hands away from hers, he stepped back. “We best get going. Sammie Jo’s got beans and cornbread, and I know for a fact, Captain Baylor will fish out the best chunks of what’s left of that shoat.”

She pushed him toward the door. “Save me a seat. I needs a smidge.”

She folded both shirts and tucked them under a blanket and put Rose’s sewing kit on top. She didn’t want Charley figuring out what she was doing. After a quick trip to the little house out back, she hightailed herself to the big room. The four of them sat at the table closest to the fire.

Wallace spotted her then patted the seat next to him. “Hurry, Laura, he’s doing just like I said.”

Her heart swelled as they all greeted her. She couldn’t remember the last time beans and cornbread tasted so good, or that she’d enjoyed just sitting and listening.

More than once, Wallace touched her forearm while he was telling a story. She loved just sitting next to him while he talked. Too soon for her, Captain Baylor stood.

“We’re heading out first light. Best get some shuteye.”

After her turn out back and some packing, she trimmed the oil lamp to a soft glow and slipped in bed next to the already sleeping boy. “I had me a little private parlay with Wallace earlier.”

Rose rolled up on her elbow and propped her chin on her hand. “Oh, you did? Well, what’d he say?”

“You was right. He be hankering after the Captain’s sis on account he heard so many stories and all.” She smiled at her friend. “That Levi of yours can tell a good tale, you know.”

“Where did you two talk?”

“In here. In the room.”

“You and him didn’t –”

“No, no. We just jawed some. I marked his shirt, so I could finish it.” She laughed. “Charley’s goin’ to love his. Anyways, I told him if it weren’t in the cards for him and her, I’d make him the goodest wife he’d ever want.”

Rose laughed. “You didn’t.”

“Yes, ma’am, I sure did. Reckoned I best throw it all down. Told him all I needs was a roof and a piece of ground to work, and that he could keep on rangering or whatever.” She laughed. “I did mention I’d want a new little ‘un every year or so.”

“What’d he say to that?”

“It were so sweet. He took my hands and squeezed ‘em gentle, like he didn’t want to break ‘em, then leaned over ‘cause I be studying on the floor boards. I just knew he were going to laugh or get mad or something bad. Anyways though, he said if we did get hitched, we’d do it right.”



Rose let her prattle on about how much she enjoyed the evening. Both of them seemed different, sounded a little like Wallace might have led her on trying not to hurt her feelings.

Maybe she should say something to Levi and see if he thought he should mention it, or if she should. On the other side of the fence, maybe he only wanted to give the girl a little hope.

A bit of hope could go far. She’d learned that personally.

After all, he didn’t really know Rebecca, except through Levi’s stories. Sure enough, if she was getting to pick, she’d take Rebecca over Laura for the ranger, but who knew? Her childhood friend may have already found someone right there in Red River County and fallen in love since Levi last talked with her.

Mid sentence the girl fell silent. For a minute, she thought about Laura and Wallace picturing them together. “Wouldn’t that be something?”

Laura raised up. “Yes, ma’am.” Then flopped back down.

Images of Levi soon crowded out all others. She closed her eyes and studied on her ranger. She loved it that after the ride that afternoon, he had her hunt through all of Code’s knickknacks and bric-a-bracs for presents for the little Buckmeyer girls.

She wasn’t going to know them; hadn’t ever even seen Baby Bonnie. Almost the same age as Charley, not really a baby anymore. Him being with all those girlie-girls brought a smile. He’d want to do boy stuff, and they’d want to baby him. Should be fun.

Drifting off on a dream about a life with Levi, everything was all peaches and cream for the longest, then Charles rode in on the black stallion Shooter had dueled. The full moon shone bright at his back. She didn’t want to look at him, but couldn’t look away.

He glared, then his eyes turned blood red and all the skin and muscle melted off his face. He raised a bony finger and said something, but she couldn’t hear well enough. His words ran together, garbled and unintelligible. She couldn’t understand them.

Straining to hear what he said, she sat up. For a breath, she expected him to be in the room. Movement caught her eye.

Laura held her hand out toward her. “You was dreaming, Miss Sassy. It be all right.”

Rose lay back down. She closed her eyes then popped right back up. "What are you doing?"

"I opened my eyes 'membering I went and bragged to Wallace about his shirt getting done by this morning, so I was jes over here sewing; the lamp troubling you?"

"No." She shook the night vision away. "Have any idea what time it is?"

She shrugged. "Only one rooster been fussing, but I ain't usually up 'fore the sun, so Sammie Jo might of cooked all the others."

Rose loved the way this girl butchered the King's English. She'd resisted correcting her, but maybe she should. She might have a better chance with Wallace if she could catch on, but who knew? He might like it, too.

Swinging her feet over, she sat on the side of the bed closest to the young woman. "You getting close?"

"Yes, ma'am. A stitch or three more and this hem'll be a done deal." She looked up. "Think it would be too forward if I were to ask the Captain for a smidgen of my mare money?"

Rose shrugged. "I don't see one reason why it would. What are you wanting to buy?"

"Miss Sammie Jo has some right pretty bolts and lace to jump the fence over, and I needs buttons by the bucket." She smiled. "You hear Captain Baylor bragging on my new dress?"

Rose stood and stretched. "Yes, I sure did. You certainly impressed him. I'd say you definitely throw way better than a middling stitch."

"It were kind of him to pay me for doing something as simple as sewing him some shirts. I'd like to make you a dress, Miss Sassy, iff in that would please you, but I wouldn't charge none."

"Oh, Laura, that's so sweet."

"It could be tit for tat; you was so kind to give me material for my new dress what started all this." She held the shirt up in the moonlight. "There. All done. I was hoping he might want to wear it this morning."



After coffee and beans and three of the hostess' biscuits with cream gravy, Levi couldn't wait any longer, even though first light was at least ten cock crows away.

He marched to Rose's room and tapped lightly on her door. Shortly, it opened, and she peered out. "Yes? You need something?"

He smiled. A wagonload of things raced through his mind, all of them concerning her that he needed, but instead, he focused on the boy. "Hoping Charley was up."

She stepped around the door into the hall. "Something wrong?"

"No, I've got business with my littlest partner is all."

She laughed. "Oh, you do?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Care to elaborate?"

"No, it's between us Texas Rangers."

"Can't it wait? He gets pretty grumpy if he doesn't get his sleep aplenty."

He took her hand. "He'll want to get up. He can nap later on the trail if need be."

She shrugged. "I'll wake him then."



Charley floated, grabbed wildly then found his mother's neck. He snuggled in. He loved the feel of her soft skin, and her sweet smell tickled his nose every time. She touched his ribs. "Wake up, little man."

"No, me sleep more." He lifted his head. "Still night."

"The Captain needs you."

He leaned back and forced his eyes open. "Why?"

She pouted her bottom lip, like sad about something, but she was only playing sad. She and Bay-lor both stopped being sad yesterday. "He wouldn't tell me, said you and him had business."

"Good, me like ranger business." He wiggled down, wondering where he'd put the pictures of the bad men Bay-lor had given him. Figured he better get another look at all of them just in case.

The Laura lady held out a shirt. "Try this."

He fingered the material, soft and heavy. He slipped it on. "You sew it?"

"I sure did."

"For me?"

"Yes, sir, made it just your size, and Sarge has one like it."

"And the captain?"

"No, not yet anyways. You like it?"

"Yes, ma'am. Thank you." He smiled at his mother to make sure she heard him using his manners. With only a little help from her, Charley dressed and headed out the door toward the grand room.

He needed to make water, but his partner needed him worse, so that could wait. Rangering was important business. Bay-lor sat by the fire sipping coffee. He hated the nasty stuff just like Miss Laura.

The man stood and held out his hands. Charley ran at him then jumped flying into this partner's arms. "Bad man here?"

He laughed. "No, want to show you something."

Charley wanted to ask what that something was, but Bay-lor didn't like it when he talked too much, like Bold Eagle in that way. Out the door, then toward the barn, he scrunched in close against the cold, but didn't say anything. Great warriors ignored weather.

His mother followed behind, hugging herself.

The man stepped into the barn. Two oil lamps hung from the main center beams. The mules, already hitched to the wagon, hung their heads like they wanted to sleep more, too.

Bay-lor pointed to the bay filly tied to the back of the wagon. "What do you think, partner? You like her?"

"I ride yesterday. 'Member? She good horse."

A smaller than usual saddle that hung over the rail of Shooter's stall. "You like that saddle and bridle?"

"Sure, Partner. It good."

"Well, I was thinking maybe I'd trade you the filly and all that tack for the gray."

Charley leaned back, looked at his mother who shrugged, then faced Bay-lor again. "And I get her back?" He nodded toward his mother. Her eyes widened, then she smiled.

"No, I don't think so." Captain adjusted his hat. "I can't give you mother up."

"I like Shooter. Him fast."

"He is that, but you don't have a saddle or bridle or blanket. All that comes with the filly, and like you said, she's a good horse."

He nodded. The man had a point. "You share Mama. Mine and yours?"

Bay-lor laughed. "Guess that would work." He nodded toward Mama. "But I have first dibs on your half, so you can't go trading her to anyone else."

Charley grinned. He nodded toward the filly. "What her name?"

"You'll have to give her one."

He stuck out his hand like Bay-lor had taught him. "Deal. Shake." He wiggled down and ran over to his horse, his own horse. She put her nose down, and he rubbed and patted her then turned and walked toward his partner. "Bay-lor, you like my new shirt?"

Chapter

Sixteen

Much to Levi's chagrin, he didn't get them off at first light, but he did have them out of the Brazos delta by midday. If he had it figured right, the mule team had covered eleven mile that morning.

The boy's filly maybe twice that, the way he circled her around and around his mama and Miss Laura. Levi wasn't sure who needed an afternoon rest the most, the boy or his horse.

Spotting a nice spot under a big live oak tree ahead, he rode up next to the wagon. "What do you think Rose? Ready for a little dinner under that tree?"

"Anytime."

Wallace reined his gelding next to him. "Want to hobble 'em?"

He looked around. "Sure, there's grass for the stock."

Soon he and Wallace had the animals grazing, and the ladies a fire. He joined Rose. "What did Sammie Jo send? I saw you and her loading a couple of sacks."

"Lots of stuff." She nodded toward the wagon. Laura held her tummy while she climbed down then reached back for the Dutch oven she'd left on the seat. "Between sewing, Miss Laura fixed us a surprise."

He looked from her to the girl and grinned. "I like surprises."

"Good." Laura set the oven on the fire. "Ain't no coals for the top yet, so be a wink longer, but Miss Sammie Jo sent half a ham we can gnaw on while we wait."

Charley squatted down next to the fire. "Me like ham."

Rose took a knife and returned with a hunk of the shank. She cut everyone a nice slab then handed out hard tack to eat along with it. Shame she hadn't baked some rising bread while there at Code Brown's.

But she'd been busy helping him with the mustangs, and Levi would never complain over time she chose to spend with him. Before long, the smell wafting from the Dutch oven set his mouth to watering.

Wallace, who had taken a seat next to Laura, pointed his knife at the cast iron oven. "If your surprise tastes as good as it smells, I'd say we're in for a treat."

“It should. I had all the fixings, and I made it just like my pap used to.”

Rose leaned out. “Your daddy did the cooking?”



Laura appreciated the question ‘cause she liked talking. “Mostly he did. Me and the young ‘uns would some, when he were too busy. But I tell you true, our pap cooked way gooder than most women.”

“What about you mother? Did she fix any meals?”

“Oh, yes, afore, but after the last baby, she and little sis took to the bed.” Laura crossed herself. “We had to plant ‘em both. Pap got powerful drunk on home brew and stayed that aways the whole winter long. When spring come, he pulled himself up by his overall straps and towed the line. That’s when he went to cooking.”

“I’m so sorry, Laura. How old were you?”

She blinked slowly looking back to that horrible time. “Happened right about when I was turning ten. It were way afore we come out west; stayed in Kentuck then. Next year or so Pap found himself another woman. She fired him up something terrible to come to Texas.”

She looked around. A part of her enjoyed the telling, but it was such a bad part of her life. “That lady done heard about the free land. Guess no one mentioned them Comanche.”

She stared into the fire. Her days with the people nagged at her. “We’s ‘bout here a year full when Bear Fang grabbed me. They probably all think I’m dead. And that nasty mouth woman came to Austin with us? She were right.”

“Oh, Laura –”

“Pap already said flat out, he didn’t want no more young ‘un. Made that new woman promise. For sure he don’t want no half-breed baby.” Tears filled her eyes, and she ducked her head.

Wallace grabbed the poker stick and racked some coals up next to the Dutch oven, then patted her hand. “You might be wrong about your pappy.”

She looked up and wiped her cheeks, then shook her head. “He were right firm about no more young ‘un. I ‘member that day he laid the law down to his new woman.”

“Yeah, but there’s a big difference between the idea of babies and the real live thing, though. He’d be so glad to know you’re alive –”

“Said right out, he didn’t want any more mouths to feed, enough were enough.” She took his poking stick and raked more coals onto the oven.

“Well, I’ll bet you a stack of these new shirts.” He tugged dead

center on his. "Against twenty-dollar gold that he'll take to your baby right off. Grandsugars are different."

She stared into his eyes for a double handfuls of heartbeats. Wasn't no lie there, only about the kindest soul she'd ever known. "I'd take that bet."

Charley jumped to his feet, ran over, grabbed her hand and put it in Wallace's. "Shake! Captain says no deal 'til you shake."



Rose loved Laura's peach cobbler, as did everyone else. A twinge of jealousy stabbed her heart as the men folk made such a fuss, but she never claimed to be a cook. Her gifts lay elsewhere.

After the good meal and even better dessert and a round of Laura measuring and marking Rose's new dress, Levi got the wagon back on the trail.

Charley hated that she'd tied his filly to the wagon. "Me want my horse."

"But she needs to rest. You been riding her hard."

He folded his arms over his chest and glared. "She ain't resting."

"Say isn't; there's no such word as ain't."

He looked from her to Laura then back. "She say ain't."

"Yeah, but your Mama's right, Charley. You need to be listenin' to her or your partners and talking like them, not like me. I know I ought be more caring on how I talk. Maybe I could listen better, too."

Grateful the girl took her side, Rose studied her son. "How about you climb over into the back until you can say you're sorry."

He stood his ground, still glaring. "Hers my horse. Me not sorry. Why go?"

"For arguing with me, little man. And I said so." She thumbed toward the back of the wagon. "Get now."

His bottom lip pouted, but he obeyed like a good boy. Then, exactly like she figured, sleep crept up and knocked the little booger out in less than a quarter of a mile.

For the better part of the afternoon, she kept one eye on the girl as she worked on her dress and the other on Levi as he rode ahead of the wagon. She got a smidgen of conversation from Laura, but it seemed she couldn't talk and sew at the same time.

Then from nowhere, Wallace rode up beside her. He swung out of his saddle and sat right over into the wagon seat. He handed her the reins to his gelding. "Want to trade?"

She glanced behind her. Charley still slept. "Sure, I'd enjoy that."

The thought of stepping into the stirrup from the wagon ran across her mind, but she decided to let Wallace be the one to do all

the fancy stuff. Instead, she jumped down and away from the wagon as gracefully as possible, let them pass, then grabbed the saddle horn and swung on board.

Spreading her skirt out behind her over the gelding's rump first, she tried to fix the bulk of its folds in the front best she could around the saddle horn then went to fluffing her shawl and straightening her hat.

Levi circled toward her, slowed the gray to a walk, then came alongside and tipped his brim. "Afternoon, pretty lady."

A heavy sigh escaped as she finished her primping just in time. "Was this little parlay your idea or Wallace's?"

"Both, why?"

She looked up at the blue sky peeping through the pines. Beginning to look a lot like home. "Oh, I was just wondering."

"About what?"

"If this was your idea of some kind of peace offering."

He gave her his best what'd-I-do-now look then grinned sheepishly. "I'm sorry."

"For what?" She enjoyed this, even if her irritation with him lingered. Could he know what it was?

"Whatever I need to be sorry for. I didn't mean to do it, did I?"

Ah, so he had no idea. She figured as much. "Oh, I think you did. Or were you sleepwalking this morning when you knocked on my door in the middle of the night?"

"Hold it. I'd already finished breakfast. It was not. The middle. Of the night. But hey, I needed to see my little partner."

"What, you couldn't stand to wait 'til first light? You have no idea how bad he can be when he doesn't get enough sleep."

"But I had to know if he wanted to do the deal or not."

She wagged head. He was nothing but a big little boy himself. He had a surprise and couldn't stand not giving it. "And it wouldn't have waited an hour or two?"

"I hadn't settled with Code yet. Had to take care of that before we left."

"And then after dinner, your sleep-starved little partner throws his grumpy fit—like I told you he would—and you are nowhere to be found."

He smiled. "I'm not his daddy. Yet."

Her heart caught and forgot to beat. Oh, if it could be. Then her heart rhythm resumed its normal pace, and she wrinkled her nose. He had a point.

"Well, what about that business of trading half-interest in me back to him? Like I'm just another head of stock you men can swap around whenever you want."

“Hey now, I figured you liked that little game. Him wanting you back and all.”

“Well, I did, a little, but I don’t like him thinking women are just property. He got enough of that with the Comanche. Then there’s the fact that you were willing to part with even half of me. I didn’t like that at all.”

He reached over and touched her hand. “Look, he and I are partners, and I thought it was cute that he wanted you back. But you are exactly one hundred percent correct.

We do not have any business trading you or any woman. I’ll have a talk with him about that when the time’s right.” He smiled. “Will you forgive me, Rose?”

Oh, how he wedged himself time and time again deeper into the depth of her soul. Levi Baylor was such a paradox; soft and gentle, but in every instance, a man’s man who could harden in a minute if a situation called for it.

Asking her forgiveness, not fair at all that he was so lovable and sweet to boot. She let him stew in his own juices a little then nodded. “Apology accepted, and yes, of course I’ll forgive you.”

“Good.” He threw his chin toward the wagon. “We might want to catch up.”

“Not a bad idea.” She rode next to him until past and out in front of the wagon. “So, what did you have to pay for the filly and all that tack?”

He chuckled. “Too much. That Code Brown drives the hardest bargain of anyone I know. To hear him tell it, that filly broke best of the bunch, and the saddle and bridle should have been gold plated.”

“So, this is what I have to look forward to? You avoiding my questions while spoiling Charley rotten?”

“No, ma’am. I plan on treating him exactly like Henry Buckmeyer treated me.”

“How’s that?”

“He worked me hard, loved me even harder, saw to it that I got plenty of the good, and kept the bad at bay best he could.”

“Who could ask for more? I still think it’s funny that your uncle used to frighten me.”

“You have no idea how he’d hate hearing that.”

She glanced back at the wagon. Laura had stopped sewing and sat next to the ranger looking up at him, obviously hanging on his every word. “What about our friend there? I thought he wanted to meet Rebecca?”

“Says he still does, but the girl’s here now, and Bitty Beck’s a couple of hundred miles away. Besides, she doesn’t know Wallace Rusk from Adam’s off ox. Only the stories I’ve told written in letters.”

"How long since you heard from her?"

"Oh, let me see now." He looked away. "Last letters came about five maybe six months before President Houston sent me to fetch you women. There were two and both of them were old. She doesn't let too much news build up without writing again. Especially the way Auntie's been having all those baby Buckmeyer girls."

"Awe, how many?"

"Four, and she was expecting again last I heard, due around Thanksgiving if I remember correct. I've carried the one where she asked me to keep an eye out for you, that you'd disappeared. That was over five years ago."

"Must have been pretty soon after I got stolen."

"Believe so. I think you'd only gone missing a week or ten days when she wrote it. Last time I stopped by... probably in the spring of '42. They hadn't got the cotton planted yet, so maybe early March. Bonnie had just turned a year old and started walking."

"Why didn't Wallace go with you then? That's almost two and a half years. She could have gotten married by now."

"No, Aunt Sue would have either sent word or Uncle Henry himself to fetch me if there was a wedding. Rusk couldn't make the trip. He'd practically got his fool arm cut off jumping on a killer with a knife, and he had nothing more than an empty gun to swing."

"Might be engaged, maybe?"

"Possible, I suppose, but I think that would have been worth a letter."

"Course, another one might have arrived in Austin the day after we left." She grinned. "So, tell me true, if you got to pick, would you pick Rebecca or Laura for Wallace?"

He laughed. "That's way too hard a question."

"I find it hard to believe that you have no opinion at all."

"Yes, ma'am. None at all. I want all three of them to be happy and live a good long life full to the brim with as much love as possible. That's what's important."

"I know, but --"

"I'm not smart enough to know if my Betty Beck or our new friend Laura would make Wallace Rusk the best wife, or if he would be the best husband for either of them."

"What about us?" She cocked her head. "You and me."

"I know my heart, and I've seen the love in your eyes more than once. One way or another, we'll be loving each other when we're old and gray."

She hoped against hope that he spoke the truth and that the love wouldn't be from afar, cruel and unfulfilled. What if Charles took her back like no time had passed and expected her to love him? What

would she do?

No, she wouldn't give that kind of thinking any place. Levi couldn't know for sure that he would grow old with her; he was only trying to be positive and not borrowing that trouble Wallace pointed out. Well, she wouldn't have any part of it either.

"Mama! Me sorry!" Her little boy's shout pulled her head around. Charley stood between Laura and his other partner. His hands cupped around his mouth. "Ride now?"

Chapter

Seventeen

Levi studied the shadows. Shame he didn't have himself one of Blue Dog's pups. Maybe he'd get one this trip. He leaned against the high ground pine he'd picked out before dark and closed his eyes.

One by one, he identified each sound and mentally marked its location; none that didn't belong or posed any threat, one more of his favorite kind of nights, quiet and uneventful.

Before due, Wallace slipped from under the wagon, soft walked fifty or so yards in the wrong direction, then circled back coming in from the east. When was he going to learn?

Twenty paces out, Levi whistled two notes. Wallace answered and then trudged in making way too much noise.

"What if someone's out there?"

"You wouldn't have sounded all clear."

"What if I hadn't seen them?"

Wallace knelt down. "When did that ever happen?"

Levi looked up at the stars. Henry used to slip up on him regular, but a man didn't have to tell everything he knew. "Fine, you get any sleep?"

"Some."

"Need me to stay?"

"Not unless you got answers."

"About what?" Stupid asking since he reckoned he knew.

"Laura, and Bear Fang's papoose she's carrying."

He leaned back. "That's a hard one; got any easy questions?"

"No, but I got a deal for you."

"What's that?"

"You go back and scalp that livery man that traded Laura that mare, and I'll see to it Nightengale comes to an untimely end."

"You need to change your way of thinking, partner. That man took advantage of a poor, scared girl at her wits' end. That's something you'd have to live with, but killing him will not make what she did back at the livery any easier on you."

"Tell me true, do you think I have any chance at all with Rebecca?"

He shook his head. "Wallace, I'm the last person you should be asking about matters of the heart. I've gone and fallen in love with a married woman who's got a son."

"Charley adores you, and how could you not fall in love with Sassy?"

"Well, I know this. My Bitty Beck is one smart lady, and if you let her see the real you, she's going to like what she sees. But the heart is a strange organ. Who knows what makes any of us do what we do?"

"You're no help. Pretend we're about to go to war and tell me where you want me and who I need to be shooting at."

Levi pushed himself up. "Right here is where I want you, and don't shoot anyone unless you absolutely have to."

"Fine, go hide under the wagon; I'll sit out here in the dark and cold."

Levi didn't respond. He wished he had an answer for his friend, and while he was wishing, he'd take one for himself. He hated not knowing, but only time would tell.

He slipped under the wagon, laid his head on his saddle, pulled his duster tight, then willed himself asleep. It came, but not before an image of Rose sashayed across his mind's eye then drifted to his heart and snuggled in tight.

After a couple of hours, his ears woke him. He slipped the Paterson out of its holster and rolled from under the wagon. He closed his eyes and turned his head slowly.

The rumble came from the south, barely audible. A soft two-note whistle pulled him around. Wallace walked toward him. He sounded the answer then strolled to meet his friend.

"Fair size herd?"

"Want to find out?"

Wallace nodded. "Why not, I love buffalo steak."

Levi helped him find and saddle his gelding then went to work on the cook fire and coffee. He hoped the crackles and pops of the fire might stir Rose, but figured the coffee smell would do it for sure.

When it didn't, he went to work on frying some of the fatter pieces of ham. Without any desired results no matter what he tried, he took to leaning against the wagon wheel then accidentally on purpose, gave it a good nudge.

In a minute or two, Rose stuck her head from the wagon's back curtain. "Morning."

He smiled. "Coffee?"

She climbed down. "Yes, sir. Be right back." She strolled toward the east, to a clump of overgrowth guarded by two pines.

Shortly, she returned and took the offered cup, looking up at him over its rim. "Tell me that wasn't you rocking the wagon."

“Can’t do that, ma’am.” He bit his bottom lip then shrugged. “You don’t have a door I could knock on.”



She wanted to be mad at him, but how could she? So cute in his impatience. “So why couldn’t you wait for me to get up? Got another present for Charley?”

“That was a trade, not a present.”

“Oh, so is that it?” She took a sip of the hot coffee. “Another one-sided swap up your sleeve this dark and early morning?” She loved watching him squirm.

“No, we need to be ready to leave.” He didn’t seem settled, a little more antsy than usual when he wanted to get gone.

She put her hand on top of his. “Why can’t we wait ‘til first light? What’s the rush?”

“Wallace is out scouting buffalo, and when he gets back and I leave with him, you ladies need to be ready. I want you close.”

“Buffalo? How do you know there’s buffalo?”

He looked off to the south. “We heard them. Surprised you didn’t.”

“I didn’t hear a thing. What do you want me to do?”

Longer than Levi expected, but still before first light, Wallace returned then led him back to a ridge where the fifty or so buffalo grazed along a wet creek bank that stretched out below.

“Stay here and have the Baby Paterson ready.”

“It’ll be ready, but I don’t think it’d come close to bringing down a buffalo.”

“Could. More likely the noise will turn him if he comes this way.”

“How many you planning on taking?”

“We were thinking four, and one of the bigger calves.”

She studied on his words then had to ask. “Why five?”

He smiled. “Buffalo robes are powerful warm, and winter may set in before we get home.”

He had a point. About the only thing the Comanche did that she agreed with was they only took what they needed and used every part, too. Nothing went to waste. “Be careful.”

Slick as bear fat, the rangers had the five animals on the ground, and the others heading east. She waited until he signaled for her then reined the mules into action.

The men unsaddled and hobbled their horses while she worked on Charley’s filly then helped Levi with the mules. She unstrapped the off mule’s harness then looked at him. “You know this is liable to take most of the day.”

He unlatched the trace chains. "Maybe two. You in a hurry?"

"No. Well, yes. I want to know."

"I do, too, but these buffalo came along, and it could be snowing tomorrow. It's getting to be that time of year." He laughed. "We'll be home soon enough."

"You're right. You planning on smoking some?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Rose loved it, but instead of two days, it ended up taking three. And just like it had been special ordered for them, the weather turned off perfect. Cool mornings, warm afternoons with a little breeze to keep the blow flies at bay, and star-filled nights with nary a cloud in the sky.

Charley and Laura helped some, but it was mostly her and the two men doing the skinning, scraping, cutting and smoking. But it was nice that the girl did the cooking and the majority of the Charley watching.

That fourth morning, Levi and Wallace led their party away from the little creek with the wagon loaded down with the robes and stacks of cured meat. A slight twinge pricked Rose's heart.

Would she have more days like these last three? She dwelled on it too long then made herself put the future out of her mind. She couldn't do anything about it without borrowing trouble, so she'd live for the now.

She faced Laura. "So, how's my dress coming?"

"Pert near done. I needs another fitting though, if it ain't too much a bother."

"Of course, and it's no bother at all." She patted the material.

"What's that you're making now?"

"Another shirt for Charley."

She glanced at Levi who rode a ways ahead next to Wallace. "Captain Baylor put you up to that?"

"Yes, ma'am. He be paying me to make him and the boy one the same."

Charley stuck his head from the wagon. "'Cause me and him partners."

She wanted to correct him, but instead pulled him on out and hugged him tight, then nuzzled his neck. "I love you."

He pushed away then scooted to the side. "Let go. Me make water."

"Fine, but hurry back."

After a quick trip Charley returned, and much to Rose's irritation, rode the wheel back up. "You've got to stop doing that."

"Why? Me like it."

She tickled his ribs. "It's dangerous."

He wrinkled his nose then put two fingers to his mouth and nodded toward his partners. "Call Captain Bay-lor. Me ride now?"

"Want something to eat?"

"No. Me ride. Eat later."



She wasn't whistling for his partner. Charley hated it when she didn't do what he wanted. "Please, call him now. Me love you."

His mother made mad eyes at him. "Say I, Charley, not me."

He made his lips turn up as high as he could and made his exasperated sound followed with an, "I love you."

Her expression made him think she wasn't so sure about that. He pressed his lips tight against her cheek then hugged her hard. He smacked his lips when he finally took them away. "Please." He lifted her hand to her mouth. "Call. Me need my captain now."

At last, she shot a whistle toward the two rangers. Bay-lor turned his head. Charley waved, then jerked his thumb over his shoulder. "Me ride now!"

The wagon rolled on up the trail while his partner worked on tacking up the filly. Once he finished, he tossed Charley into the saddle then handed him the reins. "There you go."

"Thank you, Partner."

He swung back onto Shooter, then clucked him into a walk. "You eat?"

"No."

He reached back and pulled a chunk of jerky from his saddle bag. Charley took it and slipped it into his pocket. "Bad men." He couldn't remember the English word. "Bad nighthorse."

"Bad dream?"

"Yes, sir."

Bay-lor nodded. "Nightmare, but I get it. You fine now?"

"At night, me stay with you and Sarge?"

"I don't think your mama would go for that."

He figured he'd say that. "Then you sleep in the wagon with us?"

The man laughed. "She for sure wouldn't go for that."

He didn't understand. It seemed the best answer to him. They loved each other. "The bad man, he hurt me. Mama tried but not stop him."

Bay-lor rode in silence then threw him a nod. "Tell you what, Partner, how about we have a little target practice this afternoon?"

He sat taller in the saddle. "Me shoot the Baby?"

The man grinned. "That's what I'm thinking, but we'll have to see."

Charley liked that answer fine. We'll see almost always turned into a yes. He pulled the chunk of buffalo from his pocket and tore off a big bite. He loved riding the trail with his partner.

Chapter

Eighteen

Rose waited while Levi, with Charley holding the other flyers, nailed one of them to a pine tree. He finished then both of them joined her.

“You ready?”

She raised the Baby Paterson, closed one eye, then looked down the barrel. “Guess so.” Holding her hand as steady as possible, she squeezed the trigger. The pistol belched fire and smoke but didn’t have near the bang as her daddy’s long gun, but it had jerked her arm back and up. “How bad was it?”

Charley handed her the stack of flyers, ran the fifteen paces to the target, then turned back and smiled. “Him nose gone.”

“Ah, so pretty good then; that’s exactly where I aimed.”

He ran back. “Me now.”

She looked from him to Levi. “I don’t know about that.”

Levi moseyed over next to her. “How about if I help him?”

She wanted to say no, but on careful consideration, figured she had only a slight chance of her way against the two of them. Careful to keep the barrel pointing upward, she handed the pistol to Levi.

He kneeled on both knees beside Charley and went to explaining about the five shot Baby Paterson.

Stepping back, she admired the man’s patience with her baby. He might not have any when it came to keeping a gift a secret or waiting on someone when he was ready to go, but with teaching Charley how to shoot, he’d probably stay there all afternoon if need be.

Finally ready, he placed his hand over her baby’s small one, and the pistol banged out a shot. From where she stood, looked like a bad man’s ear had a new hole in it. Twice more with his hand around Charley’s, the gun fired, and each time it tore more rips into the paper.

Levi held the pistol with the barrel to the ground then turned and faced her. “Want to shoot some more?”

She waved him off with the rolled up fliers. “No, we’ve wasted enough powder and shot.”

Charley ran toward the wagon holding the bullet-ridden flyer. “Sarge! Miss Laura! I shoot the Baby.”

Levi tucked the Paterson under his belt then slipped his hand into hers. "He tell you about his nightmare?"

She looked at him and shook her head, a bit taken back that her son had shared with the ranger, but not her. "No, not a word. Was he talking about last night?"

"Yes, said the guy we were shooting at just now hurt him, and you couldn't stop the bad man."

She nodded understanding. "I wondered what brought on this little exercise."

"He wanted to know if I'd start sleeping with you and him." Levi chuckled. "That was after I told him you wouldn't go for him bedding down with me and Wallace."

She bumped her shoulder against his. "He didn't. You're making that up."

Levi held his right hand over his heart. "Oh, yes, he did."

"What did you tell him?"

"The first time, that you probably wouldn't go for that, the second, that you for sure wouldn't go for that." He laughed.

She wanted to tell him that he was wrong. That it would be just fine with her, but of course, she couldn't—wouldn't—say that, so she joined in laughing with him. "Did you tell him that you and Wallace take turns standing guard at night?"

"No, I figured he already knew."

"I don't think so; once he's out, he's out cold 'til he wakes up." She stopped short of the wagon. "That might make him feel better about the bad men. I know it's a huge comfort to me knowing there's a Texas Ranger watching over me at all times."

He stopped laughing and grinned. "You make it sound so formal, like there's a whole company of us."

She squeezed his hand. "You and Wallace are plenty enough for me. I feel perfectly safe with the two of you on duty."

"Hmm. But we're officially off duty. You know that, right?"

Rose looked behind. Laura stood smiling, acting a bit sheepish. "Thinkin' maybe I could fit that dress now. You got time? I gots beans boiling and the cornbread on for supper."

"Sure, now's a good time." She let her hand slip from his and followed the girl to the back of the wagon.

Laura handed her the new dress, then held up a sheet making an impromptu changing room with her on the outside. "I done sent Wallace and Charley to fetch water." She looked off, then back. "I see Captain be heading there, too."

"It's beautiful." Rose went to unbuttoning her dress, removed it, then quickly slipped on the new one. "Got it."

Laura peered over the sheet. "How is she?"

Rose tugged on the bodice. "The top seems a little tight."

"It were just right back at the trading post. Is it your woman's time? That'll swell you up some."

"No, that isn't it." She tried to count the days, but wasn't sure. She took to unbuttoning the new dress. "Maybe I ate too much of that tasty buffalo."

"For sure, that were some good eating." Laura patted her own extended tummy. "We all done went and ate like we ain't never tasted meat afore."

All that evening, the waning moon reminded her that Aunt Flo had not come to visit. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't calculate exactly how many days it how been. How late was she?

She thought back to the first wife's unconcerned words. I see you no more after this day.

Oh, dear God, please. It can't be so.

After another hearty supper and the dishes washed, she joined the rangers and Laura who sat around the campfire visiting. Charley climbed into her lap and snuggled in tight. She kissed his cheek then bent over and whispered in his ear, "Did you know that Captain Baylor and Sergeant Rusk take turns standing guard over us through the night?"

He leaned back and opened his eyes halfway and smiled. "Good."

Soon, his breathing slowed, and he found his sleep rhythm. She gave him a few minutes before holding out a hand toward Levi. The ranger stood and helped her up. She carried her son to the wagon and got him settled then decided to stay with him.

Maybe her letting him sleep alone contributed to his bad dreams.



Levi waited for her to return, but when the girl joined her in the wagon, he decided she wasn't coming back. He toed Wallace then nodded toward the pine he'd picked out earlier.

His friend followed him to the lookout post. Once there, Levi leaned against the tree trunk and glanced at the wagon. "You believe in omens?"

"No. Do you?"

"Not really, but my Aunt Sue claims God warns us with dreams."

"You going Sunday School on me?"

"No, but." He shrugged, not really wanting to put the foreboding he'd been feeling all day into words. "I don't know."

"But what? Know what?"

Levi looked out across the valley ahead. "Wish we weren't going to Nacogdoches."

"Kind of late for that."

“Anyway, sleep with one eye open.”

“Who sleeps? Not me. I haven’t slept in years. Partner! Have you been sleeping behind my back?”

He waved him off. “Well, go do whatever it is you do under the wagon.”

Wallace turned his duster’s collar up. “Wind’s freshening out of the north. Want your robe?”

“No, I’m fine.”

While he settled in for his watch, he let a part of him relive the last few days. He couldn’t remember working so hard and enjoying it so much. Then her insisting on staying an extra day to work the hides so supple, made it even better.

He thought of his new buffalo robe and watched the three-quarter moon slip into the west. In a twinkle, extra stars covered the heavens, and he forgot about the cold.

Between star gazing and shadow watching, he chided himself for being such an old woman. In six days, seven at the most, he would get them to Nacogdoches, stay a night or two, then turn north and take them home.

He would not visit the disreputable establishments where Nick Ward or any of the other desperadoes were liable to haunt.

Just because the boy had a nightmare about the worst one of the bunch, didn’t mean he’d run into the man.

The next four days practically flew by for Levi in a sea of loblolly pine and pecan. He loved the piney woods of east Texas, but hated that they offered so much cover for whatever lurked.

Seemed he spent half his day chiding himself for being so jumpy and finding one or more of Charley’s bad men behind every tree.

The morning of the fifth day, he woke looking forward to the little township named in honor of Davy Crockett. Once there, he’d be on the San Antonio Trace, and hopefully, could find pilgrims or teamsters heading to Nacogdoches to join up with.

That afternoon, as had become their custom, Wallace and Rose switched once the boy settled in for his nap.

She eased the gelding next to his gray. “You still think we’ll make Crockett tonight?”

“Yes, ma’am, sure should.”

“You sleeping any?”

He looked at her. The circles under her eyes didn’t bode well. “Some, how about you?”

“Some, I guess. Not well, though.” She gave him a smile that looked forced. “What’s bothering you, Levi? The last few days, you’ve not been yourself, and Wallace hasn’t been himself either. Y’all worried over something I should know about?”

He didn't want to tell her. Neither did he want to give voice to the gut feeling that only seemed to be getting stronger. But maybe it would be worth it. "Is this an I'll-tell-you-mine and you'll-tell-me-yours moment?"

She pursed her lips and shook her head. "What are you talking about?"

"The bags under your eyes. You've been staring at the moon every evening, not smiling much at all through the day. Been borrowing trouble again?"

"I don't know, maybe. What about you? Are you borrowing trouble?"

"Maybe, but it could be God, or providence or the Comanche's Great Spirit trying to warn us."

"Warn us? Warn us of what?"

He looked away, checked each shadow on both sides of the trail, then looked back. "So I'm spilling my guts first?"



She nodded. Maybe hearing what was bothering him would ease her own troubles. No way did she want to give any voice to her suspicions, like if she said it aloud, it would make it true.

Definitely needed to talk with someone, but should that someone be Levi? She would much rather talk to her mother, or Rebecca. "Yes, maybe."

He laughed. "Maybe?"

She loved that laugh. Hopefully, he could still find humor in her situation after she told him what was becoming more and more evident each day. "Fine, no then. I mean, I'll go first if you want me to, if you insist."

He laughed again. "Insist? I'm not insisting on anything. Did that maybe mean that you're too much a lady for any gut spilling?"

"No, and if you'll remember, I was elbow deep in guts not so long ago."

"Fine, Charley's nightmare. That's what's been bothering me, and I guess I got Rusk going."

Wow, she never expected that. "Really? How come?"

"Nick Ward and I have a history. And well, Charley picking him to dream about." He shrugged. "Doesn't sound so bad if you say it aloud."

He probably figured her silence meant she agreed, but she didn't. Her saying it aloud would sound horrible, nothing could make less terrible. She reined the gelding to a stop then swung off.

Picking up the horse's left front hoof, she checked his shoe. It was tight. The wagon drew close, and she waved them on.

Wallace leaned out. "Something wrong?"

"No." She wanted to shout yes, everything, but squeezed her eyes shut to hold back the tears. "Iron's tight; he's good."

Once the wagon pulled past a ways, Levi dismounted. "What is it Rose? You can tell me."

She studied the ground for a moment then looked up. "I'm late. It's getting to be a couple of weeks."

First, he stared at the same piece of ground a minute, then looked her square in the eyes. "Maybe it's for the best."

"How can you say that?"

He smiled. "If Charles Nightengale had wanted you before, our chances are much better that he will not if we show up with you expecting."

She could see his logic, but forget Charles, how did Levi feel about it? "So you don't care that I may be pregnant with Bold Eagle's baby? He'd be a – a –"

"A baby, and he might be a she." He grinned. "And oh, yes, I care, Rose. But I care for you more, more than anything. Don't you know that?"

She wanted to believe him, but was he just saying the right words? "Half-breed is a horrible name."

He laughed. "Well, Charles might have a problem with it. But with me for a daddy and Charley for a big brother, I guarantee you that no one is going to be saying a cross word to this baby." He reached out and patted her tummy. "If it is a boy, we can name him Bay-lor. Charley will love him for sure."

"And if it's a girl, Lilly."

"Wouldn't that be Lillylene?"

She whacked him hard, and he burst out laughing. She hit him again. "That's awful! You are so bad!"

He wrapped his arms around her, and she laughed until she cried. He quit laughing when she started crying for real. He held her cheek against his chest.

"It's going to be alright, Rose. Everything will work out. You'll see."

Chapter

Nineteen

Crockett appeared pretty much like Levi had remembered with maybe a homestead or two more than the last time he and Wallace were through. He had Laura stop the wagon a hundred paces or so east of where the rectangle fort sat in the middle of town.

He wasn't expecting to need its protection, but one never knew. That night, after the women retired, he pulled Wallace away from the wagon.

Levi studied the moonless, star-studded night then looked to his friend. "Rose thinks she's pregnant."

"We were wondering what was going on between you two. What did you say?"

"Told her it was a good thing. More likely that Nightengale wouldn't want her back now. It could work in our favor."

Wallace snorted. "Well, that's one way to look at it."

"How else could I? What about Laura?"

"That's different. You shot Bear Fang."

"So? She's still pregnant."

"True, but I'll never have anyone show up claiming to be little Wallace's daddy."

"Is that what you're calling the baby now?"

"She started it, but it does have a nice ring to it."

"What if it's a girl?"

"Laura claims she knows how to read the signs, and it's a little fellow for sure."

"What about Rebecca? You giving up on her?"

"No, I was thinking I'd marry them both."

Levi laughed. "Henry would have you gutted and hanging in the smokehouse for even suggesting such a thing."

"No, I believe Colonel Buckmeyer would understand about true love."

Levi patted Wallace's shoulder. "You're going to have to choose one, my friend, and forget about the other."

"I know, but I figure I need to at least meet Rebecca before I decide anything." He rocked back on his heels. "I know Laura's got

her hopes up, but she knows why I came with you.”

“Well, if this weather holds, you should get that chance in a few weeks.”



Rose watched the rangers until Wallace headed her way then lay back down. Shame she couldn't have heard what they were talking about; wished she knew for sure exactly what Levi thought about her being pregnant.

Made a good point about Charles. Little Charley was one thing, but her expecting a half-breed would surely stick a knife in his heart.

Again and again, she tried to bring up an image of him, but all she could remember was his hair, and how much store he set by it. She had loved it, too. It was the first thing she'd noticed about him.

Was that why she'd married him? Good Lord, would she really have to admit she wed the man because he had about the best looking head of hair in the county? How shallow could a fifteen-year-old be?

She pondered that question for a bit, the absurdity of it, but for the life of her, couldn't come up with another reason why she let him sweep her off her feet.

Her daddy didn't care for him, but she put that off to him not liking anyone who came courting. 'At least he's a grown man with his own business' was the only thing he ever said nice about Charles.

If only she could go back and change her life.

The next morning dawned cold, hoar frost tipped the grass tops. She wrapped her buffalo robe tight and went about seeing to the necessities and her chores.

Once out of town a ways, and only a little after first light, the town's road joined the wider San Antonio Trace. She didn't care for being on the rutted trace as much as the less traveled trail.

But did anything matter anymore, other than how Charles felt about her now? Well, that, and whether or not Levi really told the truth.

“You're borrowing trouble.”

Laura set her sewing in her lap. “I ain't begged or borrowed nothing, have I?”

“Not you, me. I'm the one borrowing trouble. I was talking to myself.”

“Well, what kind of trouble are you borrowing, Miss Sassy?”

“I'm late.”

“Oh, bad Frenchy words! That ain't no good; not at all. Have you gone and told th' captain about it yet?”

The girl's way of putting things made her want to laugh, but she

wanted to cry a lot more. "He says it's a good thing."

"But he ain't the babe's pap, is he?"

"Heavens, no." She explained about Bold Eagle calling her to his tent that last night, then about his first wife's meanness. "'I will see you no more after this day' were her exact words."

"That old hag shouldn't have done nothing like that. Why, someone be needing to whop her in the head."

"People can be so mean and downright unkind sometimes. I hope I never ever act like that."

"Oh, you never would, ma'am. You're a gentle soul with a generous heart." She picked her sewing back up, then set it down again. "So, when was you expecting your flow; how many days past is you?"

"Two weeks, best I can figure."

"Now how come Captain Baylor say it be good, iff'n he ain't the babe's pap?"

"Because he figures it to be another reason my husband may not want me back." She looked at the fifteen-year-old, thinking how young she was to be so easy to talk to. "If Charles thought I was dead, he may have already married again, you know. But even if he isn't, if I show up pregnant –"

"But how about the captain himself?"

"Well, he doesn't like it much, but says if he was to be the baby's daddy and Charley his big brother, that no one would rag on the little one for being a half-breed."

Laura grabbed her extended belly. "Wallace don't like calling them that."

"Neither do I."

They rode along in silence for a while, then the girl burst out laughing. Rose looked over. "What's so funny?"

"This here dress I'm 'bout done with liable to be fitting me purt soon, and you'll be needing this here loose 'un." She tugged on the dress she wore. "Afore we even gets you to home." She smiled like the humor she'd found embarrassed her. "Wallace say if ever'thing went easy, it could be three weeks, and iff'n we run into bad storming, maybe twice that."

"Six weeks?" Rose grabbed her belly, would she be showing then?

Laura looked up at the sky lighting more by the minute with pinks and purples and golds heralding the sun's soon arrival on the eastern horizon.

"I sure hopes with all my whole heart that the captain's little sis done found herself a beau to love. I'm believing if she ain't free no more, that Sarge will be pleased as a long-eared coon dog with a treed ringtail iff'n he's with me. What do you thinks, Miss Sassy? Could he

be happy with the likes of me?"

Rose put her arm around the girl's shoulders and hugged her to her side. "Laura, any man should be proud to have you as his mis'ess. Of course, I think Wallace would be happy with you. Just don't you get your hopes up so high that you'll be devastated if things work out between him and Rebecca. Levi told me that he thinks his friend has been in love with her for years."

Laura looked into her lap. Rose tipped her chin up. "Just promise me you'll guard your heart."

"I will, I promise, but a gal can still dream, cain't she?"

How could Rose say no to that? After all, she had dreams of her own. "Of course, Laura; of course, she can."



Mid morning, Levi spotted two wagons a quarter-mile or so ahead. He threw a nod Wallace's way. "Teamsters or grangers?"

His friend leaned out and stared. "Could be Pilgrims giving up on the Promised Land."

"Couldn't be that. No one has ever come to Texas then wanted to leave."

"Well, that is a fact. Want me to go see?"

"If you have the urge, but looks to me like we'll overtake them soon enough."

"True." Wallace glanced over his shoulder then back. "That little gal is getting under my skin. Tell me again how pretty Rebecca is."

"No, my man, you've heard it all. Probably have every story I've told about her memorized. No new ones to tell."

"You're right. What month is it anyway?"

"November, why?"

"Oh, Laura reckons the baby will come before New Year, so I've been thinking, maybe I should forget about Rebecca and marry Laura before little Wallace pops out."

"You don't have to do that."

"I know. I could be back in Austin drunk or in some fancy lady's bed, but other than how she butchers the King's English, what more could a man want in a wife?"

"She'd have every reason to be overly thankful to you, that's for sure." Levi didn't know what else to say; matters of the heart remained a mystery. Why men and women couldn't live without each other wasn't logical.

But as much as he tried figuring it all out, the more it seemed that logic had nothing to do with love. And sometimes, could it be no more than just lust? "You heard the story of Amnon and Tamar?"

"That the couple other side of San Antonio the Comanche burnt

out?"

"No, not them. It's a Bible story."

"What's with you and Sunday School? I thought you were agnostic."

"I am, but the story is still true."

"Fine, Reverend Baylor, teach me."

"Anyway, Amnon thought he loved his half sister Tamar, so he tricked her into his bed; then afterwards, he hated her more than he thought he had loved her."

"That's a Bible story?"

"Yes."

"So what happened to them?"

"Tamar's full brother, who was also Amnon's half-brother, had him killed."

"That's in the Good Book? You're not joshing?"

"Whole truth and nothing but. Haven't you ever even read the Bible?"

"No, but that's beside the point. What does this story have to do with anything?"

"Well, I was wondering if you were in lust or in love?"

"Hadn't thought on it." He looked behind him to the wagon again. "What about you?"

"I've thought on it a lot. I can't imagine a life without Rose and Charley in it."

"Her being pregnant not going to mess things up?"

"Some maybe, but I keep remembering how Henry took in Rebecca and me because he loved Aunt Sue. He loved us like we were his, and now he's got four little ones of his own blood. We've all got our pasts; none of us is perfect. Besides, Rose had no say in any of it."

"Well, I'm not for sure, but hear tell you are."

Levi waved him off. "Don't go starting that."

"Cap'in Bay-lor." Levi looked back. His little partner stood between the ladies with his hands cupped around his mouth. "Me ride now?"

Wallace laughed. "You sure you want that wild man around for the rest of your natural born days?"

"On that, I'm positive." He reined the gray.



It tickled Rose how Levi served her son's every whim, stopping whatever on Charley's first request, then saddling the filly and getting everything just right for his little partner.

But that was about all she found humorous these days.

If she really did ever have the chance to marry Levi, it would be at least two years before she could give him a baby of his own. Why did things have to be like that? So unfair.

Then an image of Charley just born crossed her mind's eye. For the longest she relived that first day, how all the pain and misery vanished the moment Honey Badger put him in her arms.

What a miracle to see your brand new precious baby. Stirred feelings inside you never even knew were there for the stirring.

So tiny and helpless and hers, all hers. Her hand went to her belly. No matter who was the daddy, she wouldn't, couldn't be sad about another life growing within.

Scripture called babies a gift from God, that's what her mother always told her. And He never made a mistake, either. She'd think on that—on whatever was good like a life with Levi and Charley and the baby.

But the mental picture made her tear up and her chest heavy. Why couldn't things be different? What did God think of her thinking such thoughts? Was it committing adultery in her heart? If so, she was already guilty.

None of it could be laid at her feet as her fault. She didn't mean to get stolen or pregnant by Bold Eagle. And she never meant to fall in love... Oh, God.

"I hearded iff'n you goes huntin' for trouble, sure 'nough, it'll be finding you."

Rose looked to her young friend. "You're so right. Is there something on your mind? Anything we can talk about?"

"Well, I were doing some wondering. Think you could learn me to read?"

"Of course! Do you know the alphabet?"

"No, what that be?"

Rose held her hands up. "Let's start at the beginning." For the rest of the morning, while Charley rode circles around them and the two teamsters they joined up with, she worked on Laura's letters.

The girl picked them up quick. By the time she had Charley down for a nap and Wallace was ready to trade places with her, her student could recite all twenty-six in proper order.

Once Rose swung into the gelding's saddle, she leaned toward the girl. "Tomorrow we'll start putting the letters together, and you'll be reading some."

With great joy written over her face, Laura beamed. "Sure 'nough? I were smarter than I thought. I figure it be lots harder."

"Maybe only a word or two, but it'll be reading."

That afternoon, she and Levi rode side by side and talked the day away without him saying anything about the baby or what he really

thought about the possibility.

Everything seemed the same, but of course, it was all different. That night before, during, and after supper, just more of the same passed. She could tell it ate at him, was sure of it.

The next morning's cold caused her to burrow down in her buffalo robe. She didn't want to get up and about, but Levi got them going before the sun.

The teamsters, obviously not in such a hurry, got left behind. She didn't much like waiting around either, once up and ready to get.

The traffic on the trace increased, as did the homesteads. The piney woods thinned and more fields laid-by or planted with a winter crop evidenced Texas' rising population.

She liked civilization, but from the way the rangers talked about Nacogdoches, she wasn't looking forward to pulling into its oldest town

The afternoon warmed enough to be comfortable in nothing but her shawl. By the time Levi tied his gray to a hitching post outside of a fancy looking two-story boarding house on the outskirts of Nacogdoches, the evening cooled again.

Once the men off loaded what would be needed, Levi directed Laura to stop the wagon at the second livery deeper into town.

Rose made a mental note to ask Levi why he had them pass the first one, but real soon, her answer came.

An older man limped out leaning heavy on a cane grinning as though he'd just ate a whole pie before it cooled. "Well, Lord in Heaven be merciful! If it ain't Levi Baylor and Wallace Rusk in the flesh. What a sight for these sore old eyes!"

Levi swung down and smiled at her. "Rose." Then he nodded toward the wagon. "Laura. This is Otis Haygood; we rode together with Houston."

"Oh, those were the bad ol' days." The man tapped his gimpy leg, the hollow thud echoed. "How's Colonel Buckmeyer?"

"Busy making money and babies."

"And that dog of his?"

"Good, last I heard; still siring lil' blue pups all over Red River County."

He waved his cane toward the open double doors. "Get those animals into my barn. There's a bad storm coming." He looked at Rose. "I know it 'cause my cut off leg's been a tingling something fierce." He laughed and slapped Levi's shoulder.

Rose held Charley, still waking up from his nap and watched while the men saw to the horses and mules. Once they were all grained, watered, and hayed, Levi hiked Charley up onto his shoulders, and he and Wallace led her and Laura down the main street

to what appeared to be a bawdy house. He held the door open, and she walked in.

The cigar smoke wasn't too bad, and thank God no half-naked ladies draped the bar that ran the length of the room along the opposite wall. No drunks fist fighting. And she didn't even hear anyone cursing or talking loud.

Two older well-dressed gentlemen sat at one of the many tables playing a card game. A couple of rougher-looking men stood at the bar talking quietly with what she assumed to be beer.

Wallace walked past her toward a table in the far corner. "Best hash house in town."

She followed him, took the boy off Levi's shoulders then sat him in a chair. She leaned close to Levi. "Is this a house of ill repute?"

"More or less, but it's about the tamest of the bunch. If you want, we can go on down the street to one of the real rough places."

She sat down next to Charley. "No, thank you. I take it you've frequented them in the past."

He smiled. "Someone had to watch out for Wallace. He's the rounder."

Laura held her extended belly and eased across to sit on the other side of Charley. She looked to Wallace. "Iffin you needs to get soaked, or anything else, I 'member the way back. Don't worry none about me."

He smiled. "No, I might choke a beer down, but no, I don't need to get soaked or anything else."

Shortly, the barmaid came and took everyone's food order then returned in hardly no time with supper. Wallace spoke the truth; the delicious roast tasted excellent and practically melted in her mouth.

Both rangers drank a beer, but neither had a second. Actually, it seemed a rather fine place until four seedy-looking men walked in the door. The medium buzz of the now half filled room quieted to nothing as the quartet strolled to the bar.

Charley grabbed her sleeve and pulled her closer pointing to the tallest of the four. "Him's a bad man." The boy looked from her to where Levi had been seated, but the chair sat empty.

The ranger walked toward the bar. "You, you, and you. What's your names?" He pointed at the three shorter men.

The one Charley recognized stepped forward. "Who's asking?"

"I'm Levi Baylor, got a flyer on you, sir. I don't know about these other hombres."

The trio backed away. The one on the outside spoke up. "We just rode in from San Antonio with this feller, Mr. Baylor; we ain't on no ranger-wanted list."

"Best find another watering hole then."

The three hurried to the door.

The remaining one grinned. "You ain't Levi Baylor. Hear tell he's eight feet tall and older than dirt. You're too young and purty to have done all the things that ranger's credited with." He laughed. "If you was the great Levi Baylor, then where's Wallace Rusk?"

"Right here, idiot." The ranger stood at the end of the bar holding his pistol on the man. "Pull out that pee shooter in your belt real slow and lay it on the bar." He stepped closer. "Do it now. Same money, dead or alive."

Chairs scraped the board floors. Diners and card players got up and out of the way. The man moved his duster back with two fingers real gentle then with the same two fingers grasped the butt end of his pistol and eased it out of his belt.

Once clear, he grabbed it with his full hand, but Levi drove his fist into the man's face knocking him against the bar.

Wallace closed the distance in a heartbeat and whopped him on the head with the handle of his pistol. "Stupid idiot."

Chapter

Twenty

Rose swallowed hard; over quick enough with Levi and Wallace safe. Had her heart remembered to beat? Already on his feet, Charley stood in his chair and grabbed her sleeve. “Mama, did you see?”

“Yes, I saw.”

“Me love me rangers.”

She didn’t answer. She loved peace and quiet, not danger. But more than anything, she loved Levi keeping her and her baby—both her babies—safe.

Laura patted her hand. Rose looked at her. The blood had drained from the girl’s face. “What is it, sugar? Something wrong?”

She grimaced, held her breath for a bit, then slowly exhaled. “We needs a better place.” She stood holding her belly. “I thinks little Wallace is wanting himself a birthday.”

“Oh, dear. Are you certain?”

“Pert near, I be powerful wet. Miss Sammy Jo were telling me things what I should ‘spect, and iffin what she done said, my little guy’s swimming water has gone and happened, then he’s coming.”

Rose stood and lifted Charley then carried him to Levi. “Will you please watch him? Laura and I need to go.”

The ranger who stood next to the still-prone desperado took the boy. “Sure. Why?”

“Laura thinks the baby’s coming.”

“Wow. Now? Isn’t it way too early? Never mind, you go on.”

“Thanks, we’ll be at the boarding house.”

“I’ve got Charley. Don’t worry about him.”

The boy’s eyes sparkled. “Unless you know of a better place. Do you?”

“No, ma’am. None I know of, but I’ll ask Otis.”

“We’ll see if we can fetch a doc after we turn this guy in. We’ll be there directly, one way or the other.”

Levi watched the ladies hurry out with Wallace hot on their heels.

Should have known he would have stayed with Laura. This was not a good turn.

He didn't see how the girl could travel with a half-baked newborn. But would his partner be willing to leave her behind? He glanced down then sat the boy on the bar.

Charley looked at the man. "Can me shoot him?"

"No, we'll turn him over to the city marshal."

"But rangers can shoot a bad man."

Levi saw the boy's logic, but he had enough dead men walking the shadows of his dreams. "What if he's not guilty?"

Charley pointed. "Him wake up. Give me the Baby." The guy stirred some and turned his head over. "Him's on ranger papers; dead or alive. Me likes dead. Him's bad."

"Yes, there is a flyer on him alright. And it's been out for a while now." The guy groaned then rubbed his head.

"Can me shoot him's leg then?"

Levi laughed. "No, we're not plugging him anywhere."

Looking quite disgusted, he crossed his little arms over his chest, glaring. The four-year-old had his mother's temper. Coming up with the Indians hadn't helped either.

Charley looked past him toward the door. "Who that?"

Levi turned. Two men hurried in. One had long hair and a beard and appeared to have been sleeping in his clothes at least a month. The other one, clean shaved, sported spit-shined boots and a pressed shirt so white it had to be brand new. Each wore a tin star on their vest.

"Looks like help."

"Hey, Marshal. Us rangers got a bad one here."

Once the deputies had the man to his feet, the dandy looked at Levi. "You the ranger?"

Charley jumped to his feet on the bar. "Yes, sir! Him Captain Baylor!"

"Really?" The man looked from the boy to him. "You're the Levi Baylor?"

"In the flesh."

The deputy spit toward the hombre. "What's his story?"

"Flyer says he's wanted for murder."

The guy shook his head. "I ain't kilt nobody."

Charley put up his fist toward the man's face and glared. "Yes, you bad."

Levi smiled and bit his tongue to keep from laughing. "Lock him up. Wallace or I will come by in the morning to sign the paperwork."

The deputies dragged the man out. Levi hefted the boy onto his shoulder. "You ready, partner?"



The bedroom's door swung open. An older man carrying a black bag hurried in, set the satchel on the floor, and motioned Rose away. "Excuse me, ma'am."

She retreated to the other side of the bed. The doctor took Laura's wrist by two fingers just above her palm then pulled out his pocket watch and moved his lips as though counting.

"Not bad." He looked at Rose. "How far apart are the pains?"

"I don't know exactly, but closer and closer. Maybe every four or five minutes."

Laura looked up. "Thanks for getting here, Doc. They's powerful strong, I swears it." Tears streaked her cheeks. "Don't rightly know iff I can stand 'em much longer."

He patted her hand. "Let me have a look." He raised the sheet, examined her, then finished by putting his ear to her belly.

"Is my babe 'bout here?"

He covered her again with the sheet. "Heartbeat is strong, but we've got a ways to go yet." He faced Rose. "How long since her water broke?"

"It was right after supper, in the middle of the rangers' dust up."

He picked up his bag then stood. "I'll be back. She's still several hours away. Maybe even into the day tomorrow."

Laura grabbed his arm. "Cain't you just yank the little booger on out? Pap would tie a piece of leather and pull 'em stuck calves on out plenty of times." She turned to face Rose. "I cain't do this hours and hours more, swear it. I'm tired as a picker at the end of a quarter mile row."

The doctor pried her hand off and smiled. "It may come to that, but not yet." He backed away, glanced around, then looked to Rose. "Gather some clean towels or sheets and a big bucket of water." He headed toward the door. "The ranger knows where to find me when things start progressing."



Footfalls coming down the stairs opened Levi's eyes and brought Wallace to his feet. "She have it?"

The doctor stepped off the last step. "Not yet. It's going to be a while."

"So this is the time, though? The baby really is coming?"

"Absolutely."

Wallace stepped in front of the door. "Where are you going then?"

"I have other patients."

Levi jumped up and grabbed his friend's arm pulling him back gently. "Where you going to be, Doc, when we need you?"

"Home." He looked at Wallace's hand. "Same place you found me before, getting some rest. She's liable to have a long night; might even be into the morning."

Wallace stepped away. Once the door closed, he faced Levi. "I might have to kill that man if things don't turn our way."

"He didn't get her pregnant, and we already took care of the one who did."

"Right." Wallace walked to the settee, eased down, then jumped right back up. "Haygood said there was a midwife, didn't he? Let's go get her." He hurried to the door then looked back. "You coming?"

"Go on ahead. I've got Charley. Besides, I might be needed here."

Levi flopped back in the settee and closed his eyes. Before he even got to the point of thinking about a quick nap, soft footfalls pattered toward him. Rose hurried down the stairs pressing one hand against her belly and sliding the other down the banister.

She stopped at the last landing and smiled. "Can you fetch me a bucket of water?"

"Sure. Anything else?"

"Coffee would be nice, if there is any. Looks like we've got a long night ahead."

"I'll see to it. Need the water first?"

"Please." She stared at him for a moment then hurried back up.

He carried the full bucket, but at the top of the stairs, a groaning holler stopped him in his tracks. The painful sound finally stopped, and easing to the door, he rapped lightly with one knuckle. Shortly, Rose stuck her head out and took the water.

"She hurting bad?"

"Yes, bless her heart."

He backed away. "I'll have you a cup of coffee in a bit. Need two? One for Laura?"

"No, she should only have water." Looking back into the room, she turned and gave him what might be her encouraging smile, but he wouldn't swear to it. "I better get back to her."

The bit became twice as long as he figured. He hated that Laura was having such a hard time, but hated how his friend had gone and got himself all twisted and turned around about the girl and her half-breed baby even more. With arbuckle in hand, he climbed the stairs. At the door, he listened.

An expected painful, groaning wail built then drifted back into silence. He softly tapped on the door. Rose opened it and this time slipped out into the hall and took the cup.

“Sorry it took so long. Any change?”

She wagged her head. “That’s alright, I thank you.” Then she took a sip. “Poor dear girl.”

“Me come in, Mama. See the baby.” He stood beside Levi.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea, Charley. Miss Laura hasn’t had him yet. You stay with Captain Baylor and be a good boy for Mama.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He hung his head.

She blew out a long breath onto her coffee. “It doesn’t look good,” she half-whispered, half-mouthed. The look in her eyes held concern.

If he could only give her hope, help some way.... “What say we go saw some logs, Little Partner? I think I can fill a wagonload. How about you?”

The boy crossed his arms over his chest and looked up. “Me not sleepy.”

She laughed a wry little chuckle. “That’s my boy.” She looked around. “Where’s Wallace? He didn’t go to bed, did he?”

“Heavens, no. He’s acting like a crazy man, wanted to kill the doc for leaving her. Haygood had told him about a midwife out south of town when he gave him the doctor’s name. Wallace took out to fetch her as soon as I persuaded him not to shoot the medicine man.”

“Oh, dear.” She took another sip, then a groan sounded. “Better get back.” She turned and hurried inside.

Rose looked pretty worn-out herself. He just hated that there wasn’t a thing he could do, but at the same time, powerful pleased he didn’t have any part to play.



Remembering her firstborn’s birth made Rose feel even sorrier for the girl because of knowing how much worse it would get before the baby came. Perspiration wet the poor little thing’s face; she totally understood her being so tired. Laura had been working hard and if it went on all through the night....

Before long, the roosters started crowing the sun from its rest. The pains kept on coming, one after another until they seemed to run together. She sat in a chair next to the bed and dozed as best she could.

A soft rapping on the door startled her awake, and she jumped up. It opened before she got to it, and a negro woman walked in. She smiled.

Wallace’s head came barely around the door, obviously trying to see something without really looking. “Sassy, this here’s Evie, the midwife. I brought her to help.” Worry etched his brow, and he looked at a loss for words. “Tell Laura I’m out here, waiting.” He disappeared and closed the door gently behind him.

The dark-skinned woman, her white teeth flashing even in the room's dim light, nodded toward the bed. "Pleased, Miss Sassy. How's the little mama doing?"

"Not so well, I'm afraid. She thought she wasn't due until late next month."

"I sees." She lifted the sheet and pushed around on the girl's abdomen with her eyes closed. "Baby still pretty high." She stood and scurried around the room getting things ready.

"So, any idea of when yet? The doctor said it might be on into the day."

The midwife grinned. "What do a man suppose he knows 'bout the woman's ways? I wants to go through a pain with her, then I have a better idee."

"Ain't gotta wait long. 'Nother'uns building. Here it comes. Oh, help me, God. Help me."

"He is here right with you, sweet child, and He sure is gonna help you. Yes, ma'am. He will." Evie continued her examination through the pain, rubbing all over Laura's stomach and lifting the sheet seeing what she could see. "That's good, you is doing fine."

"Owwww! That booger were the worst 'un yet."

"Miss Sassy, would you ask Mis'ess Millard for as many towels she can lets go of?"

"The doctor already told me to get some, sheets, too. But I can see if she can spare more." She wiped Laura's forehead with a wet cloth. "I won't be long."

In the hall, sitting on the floor against the wall, Wallace napped, but her closing the door woke him. "How's she doing?"

"Not much change, but I think the midwife is going to be a big help. I'll be right back. We might need more towels."

Downstairs, she ran into Levi. "Good morning, only I don't know how good it is."

"You get any sleep at all?"

She shook her head. "Where's Charley?"

"Still sawing logs." Levi smiled. "I didn't tell you he wanted to shoot the bad man."

"He didn't."

"Oh, yeah. Then when I said no, he tried to get me to let him shoot the guy in the leg."

"Was that his nightmare man?"

"No. The guy's Lester something or other. I can't remember, but he's wanted for murder in Waco." He sipped his brew. "I'm sorry, here, I just got this. It's a fresh cup, you take it."

"Bless you." She sipped the hot coffee. "Can you please see if Mis'ess Millard has any more towels she can spare?"

“Be glad to. I’ll bring them up.”

“Bless you again.”

Rose ran back upstairs and into the room. She wished she could do something, anything, to help the mama-to-be. “How’s she doing, Evie?”

The midwife barely moved her head indicating not good. She stared at Rose a minute then faced the tormented fifteen-year-old. “Miss Laura, them contractions don’t be doing you no good ‘cause you is fighting ag’in’ ‘em. They tryin’ta help yo’ wee babe to come on and be born, but you won’ let ‘em. That’s why they ain’t doin’ you no good.”

Her eyes filled with terror. “Oh, God! No, Sassy! I’m swearing the truth. Iffin this pain ain’t doin’ no good, I’m gonna give up and die.”

Rose sat on the edge of the bed and took her hand. “No, now don’t you be talking that way. Sometimes birth can be such hard work.”

The girl shook her head. “Tell Wallace I’s powerful sorry I wudn’t no stronger. Just cain’t do it no more.”

“It’s terrible you’re having such a difficult time, but you can’t give up. I won’t let you. I’ve been praying for you.”

She smiled sweetly. “I thank you. It’ll be alright. I’ll have my Little Wallace with me in Heaven.”

Rose turned away. A tear escaped her eye. She didn’t want the girl to see she’d lost any hope, though if she had to admit.... “Can I get you a drink?”

“That’d be fine, a little sip of cool water.”

She went to the pitcher and poured an inch or so into a glass.

Evie patted Laura’s thigh. “Mama, let go this muscle right here, you gots it all tensed up hard. Concentrate on it now. Right here, and let it go loose as you can.”

“I cain’t –”

“Now you jes look right here into my eyes, sees there that everything goin’ta be jes fine. I knows it be hard, but me and Miss Sassy? We’s goin’ta help you relax. That way, you body can do its job.”

She rocked against the pillows rubbing her extended abdomen. “Yes, yes, help me, please.” Desperation filled her eyes pushing out more tears. “Cain’t rightly stand it.” She moaned then gasped. “Blasted pains. Ain’t doing no good.”

Rose held the glass to the girl’s lips tilting it for her to sip then turned to Evie. “What can I do?”

“Rub her easy all over, like this, and wherever you feels them muscles hard and tight, then you pats it and tell her to lets it loose. Shoulders, arms, legs, ‘n feets, too. She jes only needs to relax ‘n quit fightin’ so hard.” She patted Laura’s lower left calf. “Right here ‘tis.

Let it loose for Evie. Come on now.” She patted it harder. “I’s talking right here. That’s it, yes, ma’am, sweet girl. You doin’ good now, feel it getting’ loose?”

For the first time since her water broke, Laura smiled. “I do. I feel it relax.”

Doing as the midwife showed her, Rose found one tight muscle after another. When she’d tell Laura, she’d stay there until she could feel the girl letting loose of the tension.

As she’d gently rub, she prayed God would help her and the baby make it through. The morning dawned overcast, and the labor pains came closer and lasted longer, but the baby still didn’t come.

By the time the morning sun sent its rays into the room, though Rose tried to keep her faith strong, she didn’t know if Laura was going to make it, much less the baby.

Her own back hurt powerful from bending over ministering to her friend, but she’d never admit it, not when Laura was going through so much.

A soft knock sounded. She rose from the chair she’d finally sat down in to rest a bit then cracked the door open.

Wallace offered a half smile. “How are things?”

She shook her head. “Not good, if you’re a praying man, you best get to it.”

Chapter

Twenty-One

The door closed. Wallace leaned back against the wall. A muffled groaning scream echoed from the room then died in a whimper. He slumped to the floor and buried his head in his hands.

“Oh, God, why are you doing this to me, and to her?” For a minute, he listened, but no answer came. “All them men I killed, they needed killing, Lord. I know it was wrong, but it was war. Don’t that count for something?”

Again, he listened, and again got no answer. “That gal and her little baby shouldn’t die for something I did. Help them, Lord. Save ‘em.”

Like they were waiting at hell’s gate for this very moment in time, all the dead Mexican soldiers joined with the slain Comanche, Comancheros, and all the other criminals rode through his heart screaming.

Murderer! While his dead accused him, hope welled from the depths of his soul. “Jesus, save me. My sins are more than I can bear.”

Mercifully, Laura’s pain lessened, and she drifted off for a minute of rest, whispering, “Thank You, Lord. Thank you.”

Miss Sassy took her hand, lifted and rested it on her own shoulder then started massaging right up next to Laura’s neck working down to her shoulder all the way to her finger tips. “Relax.” She said all drawn out slow like. “Think about holding little Wallace.”

Her soft, slow voice did help put Laura at ease. “I surely will.”

She tried to smile, but even that took more energy than she could muster. “Past them pearly gates, I’ll hold my lil’ ‘un tight. I be telling him all about you, Captain Baylor, and the good man he’s named for.”

“Oh, now, don’t talk like that.” Miss Sassy closed her eyes. “Just relax.”

Right before the best friend Laura ever had closed her eyes, she saw it. That look. Sassy knew it, too. Her and her little baby were goners.

The next pain started, but she didn't have any strength left. Didn't much matter anyway now that she and her little one was dying. Her pap already counted her amongst the dead, and well, Wallace could go ahead and love his Rebecca like it were meant to be.

She surrendered and melted into the bed waiting for the angels to come and carry her away.

The black lady lifted the sheet. "Oh, nice, that's it. Here comes you sweet baby, Mama. See what can happen when you jes let go and let God? I can see his little head now. All covered with lots of hair."

Through a fog, Sassy's laughter lightened Laura's heart. Her friend squeezed her hand. Or was that an angel what touched her?

"Did you hear? The baby's coming. He's coming!"

She opened her eyes. "Am I in Heaven?"

Rose and Evie laughed together.

"No, little Mama. You is right here in Mis'ess Millard's boarding house in Nacogdoches, Texas, and your wee babe is being borned."

"What day is it?"

"Why this be the sixteenth of November in da year of our Lord eighteen hun'ed and forty-fours. That's a fine birthday. Sho'nuff is."



Wallace could hardly believe how clean he felt. Oh, on the outside, he probably still stunk a little, but on the inside. He'd never been clean on the inside before—ever.

Something settled over him, too, like peace or love, maybe both. He would be comfortable to sit there in the hall leaning against that wall for as long as it took, because without one doubt, Laura and that baby were going to be just fine.

The door opened, and he looked up. Sassy smiled. He clamored to his feet retrieving his hat that he accidentally knocked off in his ungraceful process. "What is it? Did she have it?"

Looking like she hadn't slept a wink all night, she brushed back a loose strand of red hair and tucked it up into the rest. Why didn't she say something?

"She did have it, didn't she? Or you wouldn't be smiling like that." He took his hat off and slapped it against his leg. "Well, I'll be da—Oooops, sorry, ma'am." He looked at the ceiling. "Sorry."

"She sure did."

"And she's alright? And Little Wallace?"

"They're both doing fine." She clasped her hands beneath her chin. "Except maybe Lacey Rose might be a more appropriate name."

"A girl! Well, I'll be. She had a girl then?"

"Yes, sir. A beautiful, tiny little dark-haired lady. Would you like

to come in and see them? Laura's asking for you."

A tingle ran up his spine. "Yes, ma'am, Miss Sassy. I sure would!"



The door opened, and Laura glanced away only a moment from examining every smidgen of her daughter's face, memorizing each part. Evie slipped on out passing Wallace following Sassy in. The ranger wore a grin the size of the Republic.

"Howdy, there. Guess I got it 'bout as wrong as a three-legged horse." She grinned. "Miss Sassy tell you he's a she?"

"Aw, who cares, if she's as pretty as you?"

How was it he always knew the just-right words to say to make her feel better than good? She must look like the dickens after the night she'd had. "Bosh, I don't know none about that now, but this here little gal is the purtyest little doll I 'bout ever gazed on." She lifted the baby a little higher. "Come see."

The way the man looked at her child melted her heart. How in the world had God ever counted her worthy to be blessed so much as to have Wallace Rusk in her life?

She studied him studying her daughter, and in her heart, she, the ranger, and her newborn were a family. She would never let him regret it, either; she'd be the best wife and mother to his children that he ever did hope for.

"Well, wha'd'ya think?"

"She's so little." He bent over and gave Laura a little kiss on the forehead then went back to his baby ogling. "She is fine-looking, handsome just like her mother. A little heart stealer for sure."

"Think we ought to go on and name her Wallace anyways? Or Wallacie?"

"That last part sounds some like what Sassy suggested." He glanced over at her then back to Laura. "Lacey Rose."

"Oh, I like that real good." She smiled at her best friend then right back to the man she loved. "Lace from Wallace after you. I do like that." She smiled at him then gently traced the baby's face from her temple to her chin. "What do you say, itsy bitsy one? Lacey Rose sound just right to you?"

As if exactly on cue, the newborn opened one eye and gazed up at her. Laura looked quickly to Wallace. "You see that there? How she went and looked straight up right at me? Why, I be thinkin' she does like that name, sure enough."

"I did see it, and I agree. Pleased to meet you, Lacey Rose." He extended his finger toward her hand, but jerked it back. "Can I touch her?"

Laura laughed. "Well, a'course. She ain't likely to break

or nothing.”

As soon as his finger touched Lacey’s tiny little hand, she wrapped all her fingers around his one big one. He wiggled it, but she just grabbed on tighter. He looked up grinning. “I think she’s shaking on it.”

He seemed like he couldn’t get enough of her baby, and that thrilled Laura from the top of her head to the tips of her toes. He kissed the tiny fingers. “She won’t let go, think she might be a little partial to me?”

“Lacey Rose surely does want you for her pap.”

Laura looked away; probably not as much as her. She forced a smile and looked him right in the eyes. “Now I want you to clean out all that earwax and hear me good, Wallace, cause I’m talkin’ serious now. Iffin you figure waiting to be best, you just go right on ahead and meet Miss Rebecca ‘cause them were your plans from the start. See how your feelings pan. No matter which way you choose, me and little Lacey here will understand.”



Rose watched Wallace and Laura for a few minutes then slipped out. Her heart swelled as the couple cooed over little Lacey, but a twinge of foreboding lurked. How would it all end?

Unless the ranger married the girl, she did not see how the situation could possibly have a happy outcome. Her hand slipped to her belly of its own accord.

And how was it going to play out with her and Levi?

The midwife sat in a chair in the hall with her head leaning back against the wall and her eyes closed. She hummed a tune Rose recognized as a church song, but didn’t remember the words. It’d been so long since she’d been to a meeting.

The aroma of fried pork wafted its way upstairs, and her stomach growled. She gently put her hand on the lady’s arm. “Evie, can you stay a while?”

“Oh, shure ‘nuff, ma’am. I’s can stays all the day if needs be. Dat baby’s nigh on ta the smallest ‘un I ever seen. Least wise dat lived.”

“I know, she’s tiny alright, but she seems healthy enough, strong for her size.”

“Dat she does. I thinks she going ta be jus’ fine.”

“I’m headed down to the kitchen; I’ll bring you some breakfast back up if you’d like.”

“Why, thanks you, Miss Sassy. That’ll be rightly kind o’ you.”

Rose checked the men’s room, found it locked, then headed downstairs. She located Mis’ess Millard in the kitchen. “Have you seen Captain Baylor this fine morning?”

“He and that little boy of yours headed out a while back after their breakfast.” She grabbed a cup and poured Rose some coffee.

She accepted the steaming brew and smiled. “Thank you.” She sipped. “Delicious! Can I get another cup and two breakfasts on a tray to take upstairs?”

“Certainly, I’ll get those ready. So everyone’s fine then?”

“Yes, praise the Lord.”

The woman sat two plates full of scrambled eggs, two hunks of sausage, and biscuits with cream gravy. Even put a vase with a bright chrysanthemum on the tray. “There you go, sweetheart. Do you need me to get Mister Millard to carry that up for you?”

“No, don’t bother your husband. Did Captain Baylor happen to say where they were off to?”

The lady grinned. “Well, Charley told me they had ranger work to do. That boy is a little ringtail toot. I imagine he keeps you a’hoppin’!”

“Indeed, he does.” Rose laughed. “He just loves being Levi’s littlest partner.”

“I know that’s the truth. I’m so glad the baby got here all safe and sound.”

“Oh, yes, ma’am. And speaking of that, let me get these breakfasts upstairs, and I’ll be right back down for mine.” She lifted the tray, a little heavier than expected. “Being early, that babe’s a tiny girl, but sure seems strong enough.”

“Maybe y’all ought to stay a few days longer just in case you find the new mama or little one needing a doc.”

“Probably will.”

On her return, Rose sat at the kitchen table and started telling Mis’ess Millard Laura’s story, then during and after a short stack of flapjacks with molasses, got around to her own.

Not sure exactly why, she let it all tumble out. Being the youngest with five brothers, marrying at fifteen, being stolen, living as Bold Eagle’s wife, Levi’s rescue, their journey thus far, and falling in love with the handsome ranger even though a married woman.

But somehow, sharing her story with this lady, made it seem more real, not so crazy and wholly unnatural as it had built itself up in her imaginations. The past month – Lord, had it only been one month – seemed more like a sad, tragic fairytale before it spilled out at the breakfast table.

“Mama!” She turned around. Charley came running toward her with Levi hard on his heels. “Me get cut.”

She held her arms out, and he ran into them. “Where? Are you bleeding?”

The boy looked at his hero with his little eyes sparkling then back to her with that darling exasperated expression of his. “No! The bad

man reward.” With his chest all puffed out, he pulled a copper coin from his pocket and held it out for her.

She looked from his little hand to Levi.

The man smiled. “Three way split, the way I see it. Charley spotted him first. Wallace and I just cleaned up for our partner here. That’s an advance; we’ll get the rest later.”

A part of her wanted to be mad at him for indulging the boy, but she couldn’t be upset, not this day, and not with him. “You get any sleep last night?”

“Some, enough if you want to grab a nap. Charley and I still have some rangering to do.”

“That would be heavenly. I asked Miss Evie, the midwife, to stay a while longer. Little Lacey Rose, that’s what she named her. Well, I thought of it first, but she and Wallace liked it real well, so they –”

“Here.” Levi pulled a key from his vest pocket and dangled it in front of her. “Use our room and go get that nap. You look and sound like you’ve been rode hard and put up wet.”

“Well, I never figured I looked my best, but –”

“I didn’t mean –”

She giggled, took the key, resisted hugging him, then bent down and kissed Charley instead. “You be good.”

He huffed, like being anything but good for his partner wasn’t an option. “Me good all times.”

She faced Levi. “Thank you; wake me when he’s ready for a little rest.”

He huffed again. “Rangers not nap.”



Levi started to disagree, but maybe Charley was right. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d slept during the day. He watched Rose climb the stairs. Even bone weary, she moved so gracefully.

He didn’t know how he could love her more, but each day gave him new reasons to care and admire her.

Charley tugged on his trouser leg. “Ready, Partner?”

“Sure.” He led the boy out and down the street. After a short stop at the mercantile for two apples, he made his way to the livery.

“We riding Shooter and filly?”

Levi tossed him an apple. “No, thought we’d give them a little treat.” He pulled his knife and went to cutting his into quarters. He took the whole one back from the boy and handed him a slice.

Stopping at the filly’s stall first, he picked the boy up. “Hold it out on your hand flat.” He helped the boy get it in the right position. “Do it like this or you could get bit by mistake.”

The horse sniffed then picked up the apple quarter with her lips. She crunched it then came right back for more.

Charley grabbed another piece and held it out. He faced Levi with his dazzling smile. "Her likes it!"

Halfway through the gray's apple, Haygood hobbled into the barn. "Well, now. How's every little thing with you men this morning? The doc ever get to Mis'ess Millard's?"

"Yeah, he showed but then promptly left. The midwife's the one that helped Laura with her baby." Levi set the boy down. "But we're good, the baby and mother are fine; how about you?"

"Oh, my cut off leg is still harping about that storm, but worse than that, I got some bad news." Haygood looked toward the ground and shook his head. "Heard this morning them idiots in Austin rejected Houston's peace treaty. They're claiming he gave away too much, especially after you rangers beat Buffalo Hump and his bunch on that big raid to the coast."

Levi slapped his pantleg. "No one won that war. Been any reports of trouble yet?"

"No, but me and the boys think it's just a matter of time before the Comanche are back at it. Them young bucks, like those two you and Wallace kilt on the way back from rescuing the ladies. They didn't want the treaty in the first place. No doubt, this'll be just the excuse they need."

"When did you hear about those two yaps?"

The older man laughed. "Don't you know that you and Rusk can't do anything without the whole of the Republic knowing it?"

Levi laughed, but it came out more of a wry chuckle. If the whole of Texas knew it, then so did the Comanche. Made him wonder if the relationship between Bear Fang and Bold Eagle was close blood.

Somehow, the young warrior had been persuaded to give up Laura, even though she obviously carried his child.

Would the war chief feel the need to avenge the younger man's death now and try to get Rose back since he knew the peace wasn't going to be honored?

Haygood tapped his boot with his cane. "Something wrong, Captain?"

Levi focused on his friend. "No, I'm good."

"Well, you don't look good. I'd say you look like a man who just had a whole band of Comanche do a war dance on his grave."

"That so? Were they alive? Or dead?"

Chapter

Twenty-Two

Like Haygood's dead leg predicted, a storm blew in that evening, but not so cold that it turned the pesky drizzle into sleet or snow.

The next morning with the sky still at its leakage, Levi figured it worked out for the best. Now Laura wouldn't feel bad that she and little Lacey were holding them back.

In the afternoon, the drizzle turned to light rain. By the next morning when it finally stopped, Levi figured it would be at least two days, maybe three before it would be dry enough to set out. Maybe by then, the new mother and baby should be up to traveling.

Early afternoon of the second dry day, a few wagons rolled into town. From his vantage point sitting in the parlor of Mis'ess Millard's boarding house, it appeared to Levi that their wheels had gathered a bit too much mud for his druthers.

If the sun and warmer weather held, things should be acceptable come morning.

Once Rose came downstairs from getting Charley settled in for his nap, he stood and extended his hand. "Care for a little walk?"

She looked around. "Where's everyone?"

"Wallace and Laura are upstairs with Lacey. I asked him to keep an eye out for our littlest partner."

"Where we going?"

"I want to check at the stage office, and there's a man Haygood told me about who has a headright he wants to sell."

She took his hand. "What are we checking on?"

He opened the door for her. "News mainly, but the reward on that Lance guy would be nice."

"Really? It might come that quick?"

He nodded. "Could, but who knows? Bankers do hate letting go of their gold coin."

"So, I never heard; what kind of reward are you expecting?"

"The flyer said fifty dollars gold, but sometimes it goes up. It's happened before."

"Really? I never dreamed it would be that much."

"Yes, ma'am."

“You don’t intend to give Charley a third of that, do you?”

He squeezed her hand. “No, actually I was thinking I’d put it in the bank for him once we get home.”



Rose squeezed his hand back. “He may not like that; he’s showed me that penny you gave him at least a dozen times and bragged how much more he’s got coming.”

“Oh, when it does get here, we can take him shopping, and he’ll never even know how much he’s really got or that it’s in the bank.”

“Is Wallace fine with you giving Charley a cut?”

“Why wouldn’t he be?”

“Well, it is taking money out of his pocket.”

He waved his off hand. “Not really.”

She started to ask what he meant by that, but maybe she knew. Had she ever known a more generous man? He walked in silence until the stage office where he held the door for her, and she walked in.

“Afternoon, ma’am; Captain Baylor.”

“Any news worth talking about?”

“Oh, nothing important, but this came for you.” He held out a small sack. “The driver said Major Williamson gave it to him for you and Sergeant Rusk with a warning.”

Levi took it, opened the bag and peered in.

“It’s all there, Captain. I counted it myself.”

He retied the leather string and slipped the sack into his duster pocket. “What’s the message?”

“Nick Ward was spotted in a little town north of Dallas; he robbed and killed a man then shot the grown son, but the boy survived.”

“That so?”

“Yes, sir. He also said that Ward’s reward has been doubled to five hundred dollars, gold.”

As though the increase had little or no consequence, Levi gave a nod. “No news about statehood?”

“Nothing solid. Always lots of talk, but so far, that’s about it.”

Rose noticed the change in Levi’s face when the man mentioned Nick Ward. His eyes had steeled of their own accord, and his jaw tightened. A far away look told her that if things were different, he’d light out that very hour, off to track the killer down.

She would hate for him to look like that at her, or worse, have him cold-trailing her with malice in his heart.

Once outside, she caught his hand again. “That’s the bad man Charley dreamed about, isn’t it?”

“One and the same.”

“Well, now.” She squeezed his hand. “So where do we go from here?”

“Haygood said the man with the headright for sale ran a mercantile.” With his free hand, he pointed toward town. “It isn’t too far that way.”

“Good, I need to spend some of my mustang money.”

He laughed. “You have money?”

She bumped him with her shoulder. “Yes, unless you were teasing when you said I got a cut from that herd we sold to Code Brown.”

“Oh, yes, that mustang money. I’d almost forgot.”

She backed up and pulled on his hand. He stopped. “What?”

“Should we go get Charley?”

“Thought you said he got grumpy and growly if he didn’t get his nap out.”

“He does.”

“If you’re talking about shopping, there’s a general store not far from the boarding house. We can take him there on the way to supper.”

She let him pull her back in the direction he’d been heading.

“Why are you interested in buying a headright? I know you’ve been in Texas long enough to apply for one of your own, haven’t you?”

He laughed. “Yes, ma’am. Actually, I have several, but that first one wasn’t a full headright.”

“Then why are you looking to buy another one?”

“Uncle Henry and I have been buying them up for years now.”

She glanced at him, amazed that he was more than just a good-looking, brave Texas Ranger. Who would have guessed that Levi Baylor was such a visionary?

“And what are you and Uncle Henry planning to do with all this land?”

“Run cattle; neither one of us much likes sod busting, not that we aren’t good at farming. We’ve both made a lot of money from cotton.” He shook his head. “But without slaves, you can’t have too many acres of lint. Neither one of us ever wanted to own another person.”

“I can certainly understand that. I hated being Bold Eagle’s property.”

He pointed toward a free standing, two-story with a big covered porch full of trade goods. “This is it.”

She left him at the door and went exploring. She’d discovered that she loved shopping. She never had the opportunity as a child then married a tightwad husband who kept such an unyielding hold on his purse strings.

Coaxing any coin—even for necessities—from Charles Nightengale became practically impossible. And he had to have had plenty set

back, too, as much as he worked and never spent a penny he didn't have to.

Though not a gambler, she'd bet her mustang money without a second thought that Levi would buy her whatever she wanted, not that she'd ever even think about taking advantage of the man.

While she browsed, a dark cloud settled over her soul. Why had she thought about her husband? Her hand went to her tummy.

Was the baby heaven-sent to clear the way for her and Levi?

Oh, Lord don't be disgusted with my heart.

The Good Book said children were gifts from God. Her baby coming in mid-summer could be such a blessing. The thought brought a ray of hope to her soul and pushed the darkness to the recesses.

She'd not borrow trouble. She chuckled to herself; she'd be rich if she had a nickel for every time she'd told herself that.

A chalkboard caught her eye, then she found an easy reader that would be perfect for Laura and Charley when his time came. She gathered the school stuff then went to find Levi.

She found him visiting with who she figured was the proprietor and eased up next to him. "Hey, there."

He looked over at her. "That all you found?"

"So far, should I keep shopping?"

The man nodded. "By all means, your husband here is trying to rob me, so I best make a dime somehow off you good folks." He laughed and cleared a spot on his counter. "Here, ma'am, set your items down right here. I sure want you to have both hands to browse the merchandise."

She started to correct the man, but didn't have the heart. Instead, she scooted in tight to Levi and put on her best airs as she sat down her finds. "Why, sir, I cannot fathom Captain Baylor robbing anyone."

The guy leaned back. "You're Levi Baylor, the ranger?"

She smiled. "Yes, he is, and no, he's not eight feet tall and older than dirt."

"I'd heard you were in town, but..." He extended his hand. "Sorry for any misunderstanding. I didn't mean to --"

"No problem." Levi gripped the man's hand. "So what were you really wanting for that headright?"

The man pulled his lips into a crooked, smirky grin that looked like knowing who he was dealing with would definitely increase his price. "Twenty gold, or thirty script, seeing as how it's for you, sir."

"Sixteen coin and you throw in the lady's goods."

"Oh, wait, let me get back to shopping then."

"Uh, no." The man cackled a little nervous laugh. "The goods would be extra."

She started to go find something else but decided she wanted to

hear exactly how the transaction went down.

"All due respect, Captain, but that's less than a dime an acre; I'll take nineteen, six bits."

Levi pulled the sack from his duster's pocket, retrieved a ten-dollar gold coin then six silver dollars from his vest pocket. He nodded toward the money. "Deal?"

The man studied the coins. "I could go eighteen, four bits."

Levi looked at her. "You ready?"

"Anytime."

He covered his money with one hand. "Sorry we couldn't do business." Held the other at the edge of the counter and pulled the coins slowly off into it.

"Wait, seventeen even."

"Including her goods?"

The man agreed, though it appeared to pain him considerable.

Levi retrieved another dollar and placed all the coins back on the counter. "Deal."



Wallace let his chair fall away from the wall then marked his place and looked up. Laura smiled at him. "You through reading? I sure do love hearin' the scriptures."

"Oh, for now. I'll read more later. It's wild. I never knew the Bible had so many stories in it, did you?"

"Some. Ma used to read to us every Sunday." She situated Lacey on her other breast careful to keep herself covered; he should have looked away, but didn't. "Miss Sassy's done started teaching me to read. She say I be a natural. So, I be plannin' on readin' the Good Book to my little Lacey here one day."

Hopefully, it would help her grammar. "I got you something while you and the baby were napping."

"Really? You shouldn't go blowing yer dollars on me and her."

"It wasn't much, and we'll need it." He stepped to the side and pointed toward the far corner.

She followed his gaze then squealed. "That's 'bout the cutest thing I ever did see. A baby-sized bed! Well, if that don't take the whole cake."

"The man at the general store called it a cradle." He stood, gently placed the Bible on the table next to his chair, then walked to the side of her bed. "I got a couple of real soft little blankets just her size, too. Figured a buffalo robe would be too heavy on her."

"Oh, Wallace, you just be way too good to us." Tears welled in her eyes; she looked down, blinked, then cleared her throat. "Captain

Baylor still thinking we be leaving once morning comes?”

“Last I heard.”

She handed him the baby then scooted to the side of the bed. “I best walk some, Miss Evie say the more I be movin’ about, the quicker I’ll be healin’.”

He and Lacey retreated to his chair, while Laura eased out the door. He studied the baby’s tiny face while she seemingly explored his. She reached out her miniature hand toward him.

In all his time on God’s earth, he never dreamed one tiny little girl could make such a huge difference. Even if his feelings for her mother were lust like Amnon had for Tamar, marrying Laura and being Lacey’s daddy would make everything all right.

He looked toward the ceiling, wouldn’t it?

He closed his eyes and tried to picture what little Wallace would look like, but the only image produced was Charley. Not that having a little wild man of his own would be a bad thing. Still looking up, he thought on it. Maybe You made us for each other.

Was she made for him? What about Rebecca? A light breeze chilled his cheek, and he snuggled the baby a bit closer then reached over and retrieved the soft little blanket.

He draped it over her ears. He’d heard somewhere about babies needing to keep their ears covered for some reason, though he couldn’t recall what it was. Maybe folks were concerned about what they might hear.

For the longest, he’d dreamed of meeting Levi’s Bitty Beck and sweeping her off her feet. Laura wanted him. Would Rebecca even give him a second look?

The baby wiggled. He shook his head. One thing he knew for sure, he loved this little one. Now, he had two people he loved enough to live for – or die for. Lacey Rose and Levi Baylor. Not that he’d ever admit it to the man, but in Levi he found the big brother he’d never had or the really young daddy he’d never known.

Him being on the road that day so long ago, when Henry Buckmeyer and Levi Baylor rode up on their way to meet Sam Houston. He leaned in close to Lacey and whispered. “Used to say that was the best day of my life, but now I think your birthday was the best.”

The door eased opened and Laura walked in rather slow and still looking somewhat pregnant. He figured her big stomach would disappear once the baby came out of it, but he figured all wrong. She smiled. “Were Lacey Rose good for ya?” She slipped back in bed.

He stood and handed her the baby. “Good as gold.”

“She’s that sure ‘nuff.”

He took her hand. “Laura, I’ve been thinking.”



She looked into his eyes. She loved the touch of his fingers against her own, his skin next to hers. She waited to hear, but he didn't say anything else. "Well, what were you thinking on?"

"See, Captain and Rose are wanting to get back on the road, hoping to get home before the bad rains set in." He tilted his head a little to the right. "But if you and Lacey want to stay here for a while longer." He shrugged, then barely grimaced. "Well, we don't have to go on. Not now, especially if you don't think you or the baby is really not up to being back in that wagon all day every day."

She put her hand over his. He was so sweet, so honorable. She'd love nothing better than to lay in this bed with him fussing over her and the baby for a month of Sundays, but the look on his face told her that weren't really what he wanted. She studied him, looked deep into his eyes while she figured out exactly what to say.

"Sarge, right after I were stolen, while they were on the move, one of the Comanche wives had herself a papoose. We only stopped for maybe an hour, two at the most. She popped that young 'un out, the others helps a bit, then off we go again. An' we womens was all walking, too."

"Really?"

"Yes, sir. Seen it with my very own peepers. Lacey Rose is small sure 'nough, but she be tough as rawhide. And I's been mending right nice. Miss Evie say I's built for having babies. Say the next one will be right easy, now I been through it and know what to do."

He nodded. "Thought I'd offer. I don't want anything happen to Lacey."

"Me, neither." She wanted to add as long as you're with her, nothing will neither, but didn't. Even though it scared her heart to let him go on, she wanted him to go ahead and meet Rebecca.

Hopefully, she'd already found her a feller to love and wouldn't give Laura's ranger a second glance 'cept as her brother's best friend. She prayed Wallace Rusk would see without no doubts that it were her and Lacey what he really wanted all along, not some dream girl he'd never laid eyes on.

Chapter

Twenty-Three

The next morning came, and like Levi wanted, he got his little troupe on the road. Now with one more dear little soul. He loved Charley's reaction to Lacey; he faked indifference, but couldn't take his eyes off the baby.

Levi thought Laura was going to have a heart attack when the boy stuck his finger in her mouth. After chastisements from both his mother and Laura, his little partner stalked off mumbling about worthless girls.

He eased the gray up next to Rose, who rode Wallace's gelding. "How's every little thing this fine morning?"

"Good. I'd so much rather ride than drive the mules."

"Well, I prefer your company over Rusk's any day."

For a while she rode in silence, then after Charley and the filly trotted past then looped back riding one of his usual circles, she turned toward Levi. "What day is it?"

"Friday, November twenty-second. Why?"

"Oh, I was just wondering. Have they set a day for Thanksgiving this year?"

"Aunt Sue always liked the last Thursday in November. But no, I haven't heard anything about President Houston wanting a different day."

She laughed. "I remember one year, we had two Thanksgivings, one in November and another in December."

"Really, how come?"

"Mama insisted on the last Thursday in November, and Daddy claimed that it had been changed to December 14, so we had our turkey in November and a ham in December. The brothers and I thought it was great, getting an extra holiday."

"I never heard about a December Thanksgiving. Pretty much everyone I know celebrates in November."

"Think we could make it home in six days?"

He did the mental math. "Might be pushing it a little hard."

"Just a thought." She looked back at the wagon. "We probably should take it easy for Laura and Lacey's sakes."

He had to agree, but making it home for Thanksgiving, that would be something. He tried to remember the last holiday he'd spent at home. He backtracked all the way to '35. Had it been that long since he'd stuck his feet under Auntie's dinner table and ate one of her holiday feasts? That was too long.

He looked at Rose. Without her there sharing it, he wouldn't have much to be thankful for. A wave of nausea washed over him. He didn't want her to spend Thanksgiving with her husband. How misguided was that?

She cocked her head and grinned. "What?"

"Oh, I was just remembering. I haven't been home for a holiday since '35."

"Really?"

"Yes, but it also dawned on me that being there without you wouldn't mean much."



Rose loved it when he talked like that, even if she knew full well that she shouldn't. Charles never said anything nice. Well, anyways not after she walked the aisle and said I do. Maybe his disillusionment started once he found out she couldn't cook like her mother or had never taken much interest in gardening.

She studied Levi until his look turned quizzical. "You do know that I'm not much of a cook, don't you?"

He laughed. "Cooking's overrated."

"Really now?" She liked that answer, really, really liked it. "What about gardening and house cleaning and washing? How do you rate them?"

"I once went a month in the same clothes." He laughed. "Wallace was plenty ripe. Guess I must have been, too."

Wow, she never knew there was such a man. She hoped Charley could grow up to be like Levi. "So, you're saying you don't care about any of that?"

"I'm a big boy. I know how to do it all if needs be. Aunt Sue is all the mother I've ever needed. I expect you'll be all the wife I'll ever want."

She caught her breath and held his words in her heart.

Oh, God, let it be so.

Once she could breathe again, she returned to the practicality of a union with this amazing man. "Well, who's going to do the cooking then? You?"

"We can hire someone."

"You do know you are flat out making me love you more and more and more. How is it you know all the perfect things to say? So

you mean it, really? Like a maid or something?"

"Sure, why not?"

She started to mention money, but knew for a fact that he wore a belt full of coins, and – "Wait a minute. You're not planning on tracking down that Ward guy, are you? I don't want you out bounty hunting. I'd cook before I'd want that."

He laughed really loud. "No, not planning to. I've had my fill of hunting men. I'm way past ready to settle down and raise a family. Especially since I've found you."

Her hand went to her belly. If she only knew for certain what the future held. If she could count on spending the rest of her life with Levi, everything would be so absolutely perfect. "Me, too, way past ready."

She didn't bring up Charles Nightengale, and neither did he. Or how he might impact the love she had for this ranger, or his love for her. No mention of the unspoken solutions she thought of most every waking moment.

Dreams she hoped would somehow come true. Nothing her husband might do—besides set her free—was worthy of giving any of it voice. But how could she even ask? Charles deserved better. Didn't he?

That day proved to be a good one. Wallace never did want his gelding back, and Charley thought it really made him a manly ranger to stand guard duty over baby Lacey.

So he, the baby, and Laura took a nice long afternoon nap. That evening, while she ate the meal Laura had whipped up, a plan started taking shape.



The next afternoon as Levi directed his troupe through General Smith's new town of Henderson to the spot where he wanted to camp, a strange thought wormed its way to the forefront.

As he, Rose, and Wallace worked at tending the stock and kindling a cook fire for Laura, he tried to dismiss the strange notion, but it wouldn't go away.

After supper, while he and Rose gathered dead fall for the fire, the mournful wail of a fiddle floated on the cooling breeze, followed by the high tenor of a young man. He listened for a bit, then a dozen or more mixed mature voices joined in.

Rose grabbed his hand. "Come on, someone's having church."

He stepped back. "Go on if you want."

She faced him. Words formed, but then realization came, and different ones were spoken. "I remember now. You and Rebecca had a

big fight at that camp meeting because you wouldn't get baptized."

"It wasn't a fight."

"Maybe not, but if I'm thinking right, she seemed very upset. She was crying."

"She cried a lot back then."

Charley ran toward them, slid on the grass, and stopped at her leg. "Mama, they're singing! Come on." He grabbed her hand and tugged. "Hurry."

She let the boy pull her away. Levi strolled back to the cook fire. Everyone left, even Wallace. Was that it? Was that why he had been acting so weird and avoiding him? Had his friend gone and found religion?

A drum joined the fiddle, and voices rose above them, both singing in unison. Levi had never heard a song like the chorus they sang; not at any church service Auntie ever dragged him to.

He eased toward the music. The closer he got, the more he liked the lively tune. Everyone clapped along with the drum beat. Without looking obvious, he took a few more steps here then a couple more there, getting closer.

Two dozen lamps hung in Henderson's town square. Thirty or more folks stood around or sat on quilts smiling and singing and clapping while a young man sawed on a fiddle and an older man with a long snow white beard and hair beat on what looked to be a Comanche war drum.

It sounded so different from any church hymn. The same tune seemed to go on and on, not that he minded. That song ended, and the young man started another.

Levi liked that one even better. He inched closer then took another step. Looking over the folks, he spotted Rose, Laura and Wallace sitting together on a plank bench held up by a couple of stumps.

Charley, by his mother's side, jumped to his feet and went to bobbing up and down in a small circle like he was riding a stick pony or doing some kind of war dance, except it wasn't. Many of the standing crowd swayed together, and others did a little bounce in place.

The young man increased the tempo until he ended the song with a rapid flurry. He flung his arms into the air holding high his fiddle in one hand and bow in the other. "Bless the Lord, folks!"

"Praise the Lord!"

"Hallelujah!" Several around the square shouted praises to God.

"Amen!"

Levi retreated. He'd already heard enough preaching to last him a lifetime. He didn't need anyone hollering at him about hell's fire or

how sharp the devil had honed his pitchfork. And definitely not that it all awaited him since that's exactly where he was supposed to be heading. Daingerfield springs came to mind.

Wow, more than ten years ago. A preacher's son lost at mumble-peg and wouldn't pay the wager. The boy's father had attacked and embarrassed Levi calling him the cheat when his son was the lying cheat.

That had been the first time Uncle Henry took up for him. Levi snickered. And then Aunt Sue went to telling off the preacher, and Uncle had to pull her away.

He turned and walked into the shadows until the voices faded. Shame they couldn't have sung some more songs.



It thrilled Rose when she spotted Levi at the edge of the gathering, but she hated it that he didn't stay. That singing was some of the best she'd ever heard, and she so enjoyed hearing the message the young man shared.

She always had loved good preaching, and it had been so very long since she'd heard any. Best as she could figure, the thing to do for Levi was pray and trust the Lord with him.

One thing for certain, whatever kept him from drawing close to God couldn't hold a candle to the Lord's power. But like the song's "Just As I Am" lyrics, she would take Levi just as he was. Whatever the state of his soul, if the way cleared for her, she'd embrace him in a heartbeat without any questions.

After a little too long of a prayer from the old man who'd been beating the drum, the good folks of Henderson drifted off into the night. Rose hefted Charley to her hip then headed back to camp. The white-haired drummer angled toward her. She didn't really want to talk to the old man, she wanted to get back to Levi.

Glancing around, she spotted Wallace and Laura visiting with a middle-aged couple. Oh, well, didn't seem to be any graceful way out.

The guy neared and smiled at Charley. He raised his eyebrows. "Evening. Your boy there; he half Comanche?"

"No, he is not. Why would you ask such a thing?"

"But you were with the people when he was born, weren't you?" The man spoke in the Comanche tongue.

She didn't know what to make of this guy. He seemed harmless enough, but how had he known where Charley was born? And what did it matter to him? "I prefer English if you please, and what is it to you, sir, where I was when my son was born?"

The man extended his hand toward Charley, and she turned sideways putting him out of reach. "Leave him alone." She looked past

the guy at Wallace still engaged in his conversation.

"I'm sorry." He spoke in English. "Meant no offense or to startle you, ma'am, but I've been dreaming about this young man for years now."

She didn't know what to say. She'd heard about old men getting batty. Was he one of those guys? "You've been dreaming about my son? What did –"

"God has a plan for this boy. Would it be fine with you if I lay hands on him and blessed him?" He smiled. "I promise, I have no intentions to hurt him."

Charley patted her cheek. "Let him, Mama. Him holy man." The boy spoke in Comanche and stared at the odd fellow.

Wallace and Laura strolled her way. Well, help was coming if the guy tried something. She nodded and turned Charley back toward the man. "By all means, speak your blessings on my son."

The man took the boy's hand then closed his eyes. For a bit, he mumbled something in what sounded like bad Cherokee, what little she knew of that tongue.

He then opened his eyes and spoke in English. "The Lord bless you, young man. You will have a hard life, but a long life. At the end, you will choose the sweet and reject the bitter." He smiled. "You will sing praises like the nightingale and dance like King David danced. Remember to always give God the glory. He's jealous of His glory, Charles."

The old fellow released Charley's hand just as Wallace walked up. He glanced at the ranger. "Bless you, brother." He turned and ambled away.

Wallace watched him for a second then looked at Rose. "What was that all about?"

"I don't know. He asked if he could bless Charley, said he'd been dreaming about him for a long time."

Her son held up his finger at his partner. "Me know, Sarge."

She laughed a little. "Oh, you do?" She leaned back so she could see his face. "What?"

"Him liked me dance."

She laughed a lot this time. "I do, too." She carried him back to camp and put him in the wagon then followed him in. Levi wasn't anywhere to be seen, but she knew he was out there somewhere standing guard. While she waited for sleep, she played and replayed the old man's words.

Most of it seemed harmless. Who didn't have a hard life? And of course, everyone would choose the sweet over the bitter. He'd seen the boy dance. But how did he know Charley's name or that she lived with the people when he was born?

Maybe she should write it down while it was still fresh on her mind. She yawned and stretched her arms. Charley yawned after her and snuggled in.

It was a mystery. She dozed off contemplating its purpose.

Chapter

Twenty-Four

A bit before Levi figured he should, Wallace rolled from under the wagon, drew his buffalo robe tight, and moseyed out toward him like he didn't have a care in the world. Halfway, he whistled softly over the frogs' and crickets' chorus. Levi returned the all clear.

"Anything?"

"No."

Leaning against the pine tree, Wallace started the slow sweep, the method Henry had taught Levi then he'd passed on to his best friend so many years before. Levi scooted over and stared at him by the light of the almost full moon. He didn't really look different, but sure had been acting different.

"I need to know something."

Wallace didn't look at him. "What's that?"

"Can I still count on you in a fight?"

"What?" He faced him. "Why would you ask something stupid like that?"

"Didn't you just find God?"

Wallace smiled. "Yes, I did, but that doesn't change things. I've still got your back. Always."

"Do you?"

"Yes, I do."

"And if you need to plug some hombre, you'll not hesitate to pull the trigger?"

"No. Why would I?"

"Thou-shall-not-kill is one of the big ones."

"I read about that, but I also read about God telling Moses to wipe out all the pagan sinners in the Promise Land, every man, woman, and child. He's a tough old guy." Wallace shrugged. "I figure Texas is our Promise Land, and the Lord knows we've got a passel of pagans running around."

Levi stood. "Promise me something."

"What's that?"

"If that ever changes, I want to be the first to know."

Wallace jumped to his feet. It seemed his eyes glistened, and he

looked like he wanted to hug him or something. "Partner, I'll always have your back, no matter what."

"Good." He wanted to say more, but didn't want Wallace to get mushy or preachy on him. He backed away a step, turned, and retreated to the wagon.



Charley slipped from his dream into the neither, snuggled in closer to his mother then returned to the place he was before. But now he rode Shooter instead of his filly, and the white-haired holy man galloped beside him. The grey stallion ate the prairie in long thundering strides and the holy man rode the black mustang.

The old man looked at him and smiled. "Charles Nightengale, good name for a great man. See you on the other side, Charley." He saluted as the black changed into a great eagle that flew toward the clouds. The man turned and waved once before he disappeared into the night.

Charley sat up and held his hands out. "Come back."

His mother raised her head. "What is it?"

"The holy man. Me and him ride fast on the prairie." He rubbed his eyes. "The black mustang turn into eagle and him gone."

She sat up and hugged him. "It was just a dream, lie back and tell me all about it."

He let her pull him in tight. She tucked the buffalo robe around him. "Him say, 'Charles Nightengale a good name for a great man.'"

"Well, he's right; you are going to be a great man."

"Then him say, 'See you on the other side, Charley.'"

"Other side of what?"

"Don't know. Me want talk, but he flew away on eagle." He twisted her hair around his finger. "Me say, 'Come back.' Him not come."



Rose held Charley close until his breathing slowed, and he relaxed. She shouldn't have let that old man put his hands on her baby. Him beating on that war drum should have tipped her off. Probably some kind of shaman.

Why would he claim to have dreamed about her boy for years? Well, her son would definitely have a great example if everything ever worked out with her and Levi.

She tried to find sleep again, but after a while, got tired of trying and dismissed the effort. She eased away from Charley and slipped

out. Pulling her shawl tight against the chill, she went to work on building the fire. Soon, a right nice one blazed, and a pot of coffee brewed.

Levi rolled out from under the wagon. “Couldn’t go back to sleep after Charley’s night horse, either?”

“Did you hear?”

“I heard him holler ‘come back’ plain enough. The rest, only a word or two.”

While the coffee made, she told him about the old man and all that he’d said then about Charley’s dream. She found the cups and retrieved two, poured them full. Gave one to Levi. “What do you think it means?”

He sipped once. “Kids have bad dreams. I never figured they mean anything, but what do I know?”

A lot, she thought, but didn’t say anymore about the dream or vision or whatever it was. Maybe Charley wouldn’t even remember it. She sat down next to Levi and leaned against his arm.

Halfway through her coffee, she nudged him. “They’re having another service this morning; hopefully, we can be gone before they start gathering.”

He laughed. “Don’t want to give the old boy another shot at Charley, huh?”

She bumped harder, but didn’t respond verbally. Of course, she didn’t want that scary old man around her baby. “He reminded me a lot of a shaman who lived on the other side of the Rio Bravo up in the mountains. Bold Eagle took us to see him a few times.”

She swallowed hard at the memory. “First time was early on. I was big and pregnant with Charley, but I’d picked up enough Comanche to understand pretty well what everyone said.”

She pressed in close. “The holy man was fascinated with my hair. He kept rubbing my head. After a while, he put his hand on my belly. His eyes glazed over, and he went to jabbering. I slapped him.” She tried to shake away the scene from her mind’s eye. “I thought Bold Eagle would kill me, but the shaman stopped him.”



Levi waited for the rest of the story, but she didn’t finish. “What did the guy say that made you slap him?”

She tossed her dregs toward the fire. “He said my baby was a devil.”

Levi laughed. “Well, he’s a little wild man, but I wouldn’t call him a devil.” She leaned in harder. He loved her being so close, and would love it all the more when he knew for sure she would be his

permanently. "Did he say anything else?"

"Said I was worth many ponies, and that Bold Eagle shouldn't kill me, that the chief would be walking the spirit world when my baby boy counted much coup."

Levi wanted to put his arm around her, hug her tight and tell her everything would be fine with her and Charley, but that might lead to more than he or she was prepared to handle.

Besides, he learned a long time ago not to promise something he couldn't deliver. Or could he? No one would have to know.

What was one more dead man? Hell wouldn't be any hotter if he were to take care of Nightengale himself. He shook that thought away. He'd not curse himself or Rose by killing an innocent man.

Laura stuck her head out of the back of the wagon. "Hey, look who done beat the roosters up."

Wallace strolled in leading the off mule. "Morning, folks, best get a move on. Grass will be growing under our feet in no time."

While the girl fixed breakfast and Rose saw to the rest of the ladies' chores, Levi helped Wallace with the stock. Before any of the church folks showed, his little troupe cleared the town center. A mile or so out, a small group of settlers milled outside of a rough-hewn cabin. As Levi rode past, the young fiddler from the night before spotted him and trotted toward him.

Levi reined in Shooter. "Can I help you?"

"No, sir." He stuck out a piece of paper. "My grandfather wanted me to give this to you."

Levi held his palm out. "Tell him thanks, but no thanks."

"Sorry, sir, but I can't tell him anything. He died in the night. Yours' was the last note he wrote." He stepped closer and held it toward him a bit higher this time.

"Sorry for you loss, son." Levi took it, folded it, and stuck it in his inside pocket with the flyers. "Enjoyed your fiddling last night."

He backed away. "Thank you, sir, and bless you."

As the day before, Wallace drove the wagon, and Rose and Charley rode with Levi, except the boy kept the filly doing double the distance of Shooter and Wallace's gelding.

Chatting away about everything except what had just happened, she not once asked about the note. Had to have seen the young man give it to him. Nor did she mention Charley's dream again.

He didn't know what to think about any of it. His Aunt Sue might. Shame he was agnostic and not a died-in-the-wool atheist, then he could disavow it all. With what had been happening, he might not be able to ride the fence much longer.

After several miles of mulling the unanswerable question as to the reality of a creator, he decided to put the debate on hold.

High noon brought a short break for dinner, and as soon as he got Charley in his guard spot looking out for little Lacey, Levi nodded Wallace to the far side of a pine he'd stopped by.

His friend glanced around. "What is it? You see something?"

Levi smiled. "No, nothing like that. Only wondering how Laura and Lacey were holding up."

"They're doing fine, good. All the baby does is eat and sleep, and Laura claims she's good as gold."

"Excellent. We've made better than fifteen miles so far today. If we can keep it up and don't take the ferry, we could be sticking our feet under Aunt Sue's dinner table for some Thanksgiving turkey." He shrugged. "She makes the best dressing this side of the Mississippi."

"How about pumpkin pie?"

"That, too."

Wallace looked away, moved his mouth like doing some mental math. "Sounds good to me, but are you sure we're that close?"

"Yes, we could be at that diner I've told you about in Mount Pleasant day after tomorrow. Then if we take the trace through the Cuthand bottoms, we could be there by noon Thursday. Auntie never eats before two on a holiday."

"Sounds like you got it all worked out."

"Maybe, but it'll be hard doing almost thirty mile a day."

Wallace laughed. "When we were chasing Buffalo Hump and his band of merry men, I remember plenty of days we made better than forty."

"True, but we didn't have a baby gal, two ladies, and a little wild man in tow."

"I say we go for it. I'm past ready to meet Rebecca."

Levi glanced around. "Really? I figured you'd already made a choice."



Wallace made his I'm-all-balled-up face. "We've talked about her some. Confused, partner. Laura knows why I came with you in the first place." He spit. "I can't see breaking the girl's heart, but I don't want mine broken, either."

The captain laughed. "The real Bitty Beck may not be the Rebecca you've been sparking in your dreams all these years."

"I've put some considering on that. She probably won't even look at me twice, but I owe it myself to keep my powder dry. Once we're there, who knows? Laura may not want anything to do with me, either."

Levi waved him off. "Whatever." He stepped back and looked up

at the sun, still overhead but a degree or two toward the western horizon. "We best get after it."

Wallace headed toward the wagon. He hated riding the hard bench, but he enjoyed the time with Laura. She made him think more highly of himself.

That gave him more optimism regarding Princess Rebecca up there on that sky high pedestal. Maybe if he and the royalty did hit it off, Rebecca might let him adopt the girl and her baby.

That image brought a smile. Well, maybe just Lacey. After all, she had been named after him. That night while he stood, or rather sat his watch, he decided he needed to tell Laura about his mother. He hated it that he'd lied to the girl, but that was before, back when he didn't deem the truth all that important; except with Levi, of course.

On the road the next day, he tried a couple of times to open the conversation, but he'd take a breath, and she'd start another story or ask another question or excuse herself to see to the baby.

Finally, with the sun getting low in the west, he blurted it out. "I lied to you."

"Lied? You skunk. What'd ya go fibbing about?"

"My mother."

She scooted sideways and stared at him. "What were it? Now tell us true, I can take it. Cain't 'magine what you had to lie about, though."

"Well, she didn't own a ladies' dress shop back east like I said. She was a sporting lady in New Orleans."

"A what?"

He looked over hard; her expression said she really didn't know. "A harlot. A whore. A prostitute."

"Oh." She ducked her head. "Sorry, Wallace. I can understand that might be a thing that a body wouldn't go spreading around."

"When she got pregnant with me, she was older than most of the other ladies in her house on Bourbon Street. Said she kept a few coins to pay the butcher when she found herself in that condition. But decided instead that she'd had enough of the life and used the money to buy herself a ticket west."

"She still kicking it around?"

Wallace had to smile. Why didn't she just ask straight out? "No, she died the winter of '35."

"Why, you's just a little ol' whippersnapper back then, weren't ya?"

He started to remind her that she was only fifteen now, the same age, but a smattering of cabins came into view. "Hey, what do you know? Looks like we made Mount Pleasant just like the captain figured."

Chapter

Twenty-Five

Levi crossed the little spring-fed creek then led them up the hill toward Titus' Trading Post. Several new sawed-board buildings along the double-wide trace road sported signs offering to liberate the grangers or teamsters from their hard earned coins.

Tinker, tailor, watchmaker, and many more advertised their services if you had the money.

A barber's red and white pole caught his eye, but as much as he would like a hot bath and shave, he wanted more to get a room and stick his feet under a table in that little diner he loved so much.

Folks hurried about, but still nothing that compared to the foot traffic in the capital or even Nacogdoches. For sure, the little town was growing, just like Texas. If the idiots in Austin and Washington could work things out, and it became a bona fide state, it should really boom.

He rode to the barn behind the trading post and dismounted. Fished out a five-dollar gold piece and handed it to Rose. "Down the street just a way, there's a boarding house. Get us two rooms if you would be so kind. Head on back quick as you can. Wallace and I will meet you directly at the diner right across the street there." He pointed, and she handed over the reins to Wallace's gelding.

"I can do that. Should we gather some things now?"

"We can do that after supper. Go on ahead before some pilgrim and his swarm of urchins wander in and take all the rooms."

She laughed. "Yes, sir. Anything else, sir?"

Long as she was asking, he sure could go for a kiss and a hug, but that wouldn't do, not yet anyways, and for sure not in front of everyone.

For a fleeting second, he lingered on that thought then made himself focus on the here and now. "No, that'll do. We'll meet up after we see to the stock."

Wallace jumped down, took the baby, then helped the girl as she eased off the wagon. Soon enough, the mules and horses were stalled, hayed, and grained.

The tack hung on wall pegs, and the horse blankets draped over

top rails to dry. Levi nodded toward the diner. "Get us a table. I want to see if Mr. Titus is around. Figured he'd have showed before now."

"Want me to go ahead and order?"

"Yeah, sure."

"Anything in particular?"

"Whatever. Nothing in that place is bad."

Levi stopped at the trading post's front porch and glanced down the street while Wallace strolled on toward the diner. Rose and Laura hadn't started back yet. He had a bit of time to see if Titus had any news.

He turned to go inside, then froze at the sight he witnessed through the store's big front window. He cupped his hand over his mouth and whistled two low notes.

Wallace stopped, spun, and pulled his pistol. Levi drew his own and busted through the front door.

Nick Ward had that Arkansas toothpick of his held to some lady's throat. Andrew Titus was pulling gold coins from behind his display cabinet and stacking them on the counter.

Levi pointed his pistol at Ward. "Drop the knife, Nick."

"Hey, what do you know? It's the boy ranger." He turned the lady toward him. "You ain't going to shoot. You'd kill her. Then I'd cut you into little pieces."

Levi stepped closer. The lady pled with her eyes. Obvious terror kept her from speaking. "Do as I say, Nick, or you're a dead man."

Ward extended his left hand, exposing a small revolver, and smiled his wicked grin. "Looks like we got ourselves a Mexican standoff, Baylor."

"I don't think so."

Ward's mouth opened, but before a word passed his lips, his head jerked skyward. He dropped both knife and gun. The lady skedaddled. Wallace walked around from behind him.

He turned. "Rusk, I should have known." He took one step then fell face down on the plank floor.

Wallace bent over, pulled his knife out of Ward's back, then smiled. "Hey, Nick, how you doing?" He toed the dead man and shrugged. "Not too good, I guess."

The lady looked from Levi to Wallace then Ward. Her hand clutching her neck, she exhaled, filled her lungs, then screamed. Titus ran around the counter and wrapped his arms around the woman.

He faced Levi. "I was never so glad in my life to see anyone as I was to see you walk in that door." He looked back. "You must be Wallace Rusk." He stuck his right hand out, still holding the lady with the other. "Thank you, sir."

Wallace stepped forward and shook it. "My pleasure."

Titus held the woman out at arm's length. "Are you alright, Weezie? Did he cut you?"

She rubbed her neck. "No, but that horrible man scared ten years off my life." She thanked both Wallace and Levi then hurried out, like being in the same room with the corpse of a cold-blooded killer was more than she could take. "I'll be back later for my things, Andrew."

Titus raised both hands, palms to Heaven. "The Lord sure is good. Sending me Levi Baylor and Wallace Rusk just as Nick the Knife was about to..." He closed his eyes. "I don't even want to think what he might have done, much less speak it."

Levi smiled, digging into his vest pocket. He pulled out a silver dollar and extended it. "Here, sir. We stalled our mules and horse and threw them some of your hay. If this isn't enough, just let me know."

Titus held his hands up. "No, sir-ree. I'm not taking one red cent from either of you for the rest of my natural born days. I couldn't pay you enough for what you saved me. Don't even think about trying to give me any money."

Levi figured he'd say that but wanted to offer anyway. "Well, seems we have made a mess. Where's your mop?"

"Don't you dare. I'm sure once Weezie Nichols gets herself together, there'll be plenty of folks who want to come and gawk." He laughed. "I may have to stay open late tonight."

As the shopkeeper predicted, a few folks slipped in the door and went straight to look at Ward. Levi took Titus aside. "Wallace and I are going across the street to get us a bite of supper. You folks got a marshal?"

"Yes, sir. We sure do."

Levi fished Ward's flyer from his duster's inside pocket and thumbed the bullet holes smooth. "A little target practice. I'd appreciate it if you'd get him to sign off on this for me." He handed the paper over.

Titus studied the flyer a moment then smiled. "That's a right nice reward, and you two rangers earned every nickel of it. I'll be pleased to see to it."

Levi tipped his hat, proud the man didn't ask for a cut. He caught Wallace's eye, even though he was busy telling the story to the small crowd that filled the store.

"You ready?"

He nodded then excused himself. "You didn't know I was born ready, Captain?"

Just as he neared the entrance, Charley burst through. Levi snatched the boy up. "Where's your mama?"

"I'm right here." Rose stood in the door with Laura and Lacey right behind her. "Are you hurt?"

“No, ma’am. We’re fine. You ladies all set to eat?”

Charley wiggled. “No, me want to see the bad man.”

Levi held tight and looked to Rose questioning her with his eyes. She seemed indecisive. “I don’t know.”

“Please and thank you.” The boy put his hands on Levi’s cheeks and turned his face to him. “Me want to see my night horse man.”

Levi set him down, but kept a hold of his hand and walked back with him. The crowd parted like for Moses or something. He stuck his boot toe under Ward and flipped him over. The cold-bloodiest killer he’d ever known stared at the ceiling, a pained expression frozen on his face.

Charley bent over and tweaked his nose. “You not bad now.”

Levi picked the boy up and headed toward the door. “Ready to eat now?”

Charley nodded then leaned in close. “Me count coup on him.”

“Yes, you did.”

Rose reached for Charley, but he shied away, wiggled down, and ran across the street. She stepped in close to Levi. “Sure seems to me that the Lord certainly had you in the right place at the right time.”

Levi didn’t answer. He didn’t have any answers when it came to God, but if there was indeed an Almighty, why would he allow a killer like Nick Ward to walk His earth in the first place?

Why arrange it so that he walked in when he did? What if... He stopped that runaway thought before going any further. Everything had worked out, like it always did.

Maybe he was blessed, but by who or should he say whom? Aunt Sue would know. Man, how many times had she corrected his grammar over the years? Sure would be good to see her again.

Rose bumped her shoulder against his. That seemed about all the contact either allowed themselves here lately. “What are you smiling about?”

He stepped onto the diner’s front porch. “I was thinking about Aunt Sue, being home.”

“Today’s Tuesday, right?”

He held the door open for her. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Think maybe we could wait to go see Charles on Friday, Lord willing?”

Charley ran to him and grabbed his hand. “Partner, come on. Me got table.”

Levi smiled at the boy, then his mother. “If the creek don’t rise.” And that’s all he answered her with. But to himself he added, sure, Friday would be soon enough. He would definitely visit Nightengale, but without her and the boy.



After his last bite, Wallace leaned over, kissed Lacey's little head, then winked at Laura. "Captain's been touting this diner for years, but it can't hold a candle to your cooking."

She smiled, looked from him to Sassy then Levi and back. "Stop it now. Why, my cheeks'll be redder than Miss Rose's hair iffin you keep at your fibbing."

He winked again; her smile didn't match her words. "I'd not lie about such a thing, and I ain't bragging; it's just God's truth."

Before she could protest more, Levi stood. "He's right, Laura, you have a special talent. But even the cook should have a night off now and then."

After more howdies, glad-hands, and pats on the back than Wallace could count, he found himself and Levi alone in the room Rose had secured.

He grabbed the only chair and dragged it to the window then sat and fingered the curtain back. "You remember that hombre Ward rode with? Whatever happened to him?"

Levi sat on the bed and went to pulling his boots off.

Wallace threw his chin at his friend. "Need any help there?"

"No, I can pull off my own boots. Didn't we shoot him in Laredo?"

"Maybe. You'd let Rose pull your boots off if she was here."

Levi set the left boot down. "She's not here."

"Whatever. I'm thinking that was a different curly wolf in Laredo. Anyway, Ward usually rode with someone. Best be on our toes."

Levi waved him off. "When aren't we? I'm past tuckered out; go ahead and take the first watch." He swung his legs onto the bed and laid his head on the only pillow. "Thanks, partner."

Wallace didn't respond. He gazed out the window. For the first time in his life, he regretted having to kill another human being; not that Ward didn't get his just desserts.

If he's killed a hundred times over, that wouldn't equal his cold-blooded meanness. He thought back to when he'd counted the man a friend.

Like he and Levi, Nick Ward had been in that first Texas Ranger troupe. It bothered him that the man was probably burning now. If he'd taken him alive, could he have led him to the Lord?

"Think ol' Nick's in hell?"

Levi opened one eye. "If there is such a place, I hope so."

The captain appeared to be asleep then raised up. "Partner, you didn't have a choice. If you hadn't thrown your knife when you did, I would have taken a shot. And who knows?

"That lady might have gotten hurt or worse, even if I missed her and hit only Ward. He probably would have slit her throat on the way

down. You know, like a frog kicking in the frying pan. Not to mention that pea shooter he had pointed at me.”

“You’re right. I know it.”

He lay back down. “Self defense, plain and simple. Ward had a black heart. We found that out the hard way. Wasn’t any hope for him.”

“Well, maybe, but I would have liked to talk to him first.”

“When I get there myself, I’ll remember to tell him how bad you felt about killing him.”

Wallace ignored his friend; didn’t want to go there. He’d been praying for Levi every day since he got himself saved. He’d also been asking for the exact right time to talk to his partner about the condition of his soul. How could anyone think they were going to hell and not do something about it?

Levi treated it like it was the same as going to the West Texas badlands or something.

He leaned back and went to watching out the window. He and Levi hated surprises. A man didn’t last long in Texas unless he kept his guard up.

As he moved his eyes slowly over the street below, he wondered when Titus would be in the next morning. Be nice to get Laura something that fit her better.

Maybe a new bonnet, too.

One with flowers on it.

Chapter

Twenty-Six

False dawn came as it did every morning before the sun showed its face. The roosters went to bragging, and a few early birds took to the street hunting that next dollar.

Levi watched for a bit, then stood and reached for the ceiling. The ache in his back barked, but he ignored it. “Hey.” He touched Wallace’s shoulder. “You going to sleep your life away?”

His partner opened his eyes. “Sun up?”

“Not yet.”

Wallace threw the blanket off then swung his feet over and sat on the side of the bed. “Think Titus is open?”

“Maybe, why?”

“I want to get Laura and the baby some things.”

Levi nodded. He’d like to get on the trace, but picking up a few more things would be nice. “Get your boots on. We’re burning daylight.”

He didn’t tiptoe past the ladies’ room, but he soft walked for sure. Hard to shop for someone when they were looking over your shoulder. Halfway to the trading post, the establishment’s front door swung open, and the man himself went to sweeping his porch.

Levi got within ear shot. “Mr. Titus, I’ve got a question.”

“Hey, now.” The man set his broom against the front post. “Good morning, Captain, Sergeant. How can I help you?”

“I was wondering. Is there another mercantile in town?”

The man looked surprised then a little insulted. “Well, yes. Matter of fact, there’s two.”

Levi ordered his lips straight. “Would you be so kind to give us directions?”

He hooked his thumbs in his shopkeeper’s apron and stared hard at him. “Why would you be wanting directions? Best store in town is right behind me.”

“Well, it’s Wallace here. He’s got some gold coins that are burning a hole in his pocket and seeing how our money isn’t good here, I figure we best go elsewhere.”

The man smiled. “You put it that way, guess I’ll be proud to sell

you men whatever you want.”



Horrible nausea hit Rose. She swallowed then willed herself still. She hated throwing up more than anything she could think of. She swallowed again. If she could lie without one movement, sometimes it would pass.

The sunlight peeking through the lace curtains cast bright designs of light on the far wall. Charley snuggled in closer. She feared a new wave, but it didn't come. Laura and Lacey appeared to sleep soundly.

Wednesday morning. Tomorrow afternoon, Levi would be home with his family for Thanksgiving dinner. Seeing Rebecca and all the little Buckmeyer ladies would be wonderful.

Hopefully, they would have news of her mama and brothers. Would they have stayed in contact with Charles? Probably not; what reason would they have?

Charles, Charles. What would it be like to see him again? Could she stand next to her husband and watch Levi ride away? She could hardly bear to even think of such a thing. Was she able?

And what about her son? God love his little heart; it wasn't fair that he kept being ripped away from the men he loved. But what else could she do?

An image of her husband waiting in front of the house with open arms for her and Charley flooded her soul. That place, that life seemed a hundred years ago.

Oh, God, what should she do?

She didn't even know anymore if she could let Levi ride out of her life. Didn't seem possible to live any part of it without him, not now.

She forced herself to stop thinking about the day after tomorrow. Today had enough trouble of its own. Isn't that what the Bible said? She eased out of bed, dressed, and slipped out.

The door to the other bedroom stood barely opened. She knocked twice softly then cracked it a little more. "Morning."

No reply came, so she stuck her head just inside. Empty. She resisted the urge to make the bed. Lord knew she'd paid way too much of Levi's gold for the rooms.

For a while, she debated with herself then decided to find the rangers. Charley would sleep at least another hour, maybe two, if no one woke him.

She spotted Levi at Titus' place carrying a tow sack to the wagon. She tousled the near mule's long ear on the way by. "Good morning."

Levi tipped his hat. "Yes, ma'am, and even better now. How are you this fine day?" He smiled and glanced over his shoulder eastward.

“Or is it afternoon?”

She wanted to pick up on his playfulness and punch him or something, but that couldn't do anything but worsen the bad situation. Besides, she was getting pretty close to home.

One never could tell who might be watching. She couldn't let anything happen that would fuel the gossips' acid tongues; for Levi's sake as much as her own.

No more touching. Not until things were settled.

She forced herself to return his smile. “I'm good.”

He set his load in the wagon then eased closer and took her hand. “You don't look too good. I mean – you're beautiful, always, but –”

“Stop.” Now her smile came natural. “Truth be known, I'm not feeling very well. Woke up all queasy, but at least I didn't throw up.”

“That's probably for the best.” He leaned in close. “I might not have been able to restrain myself if you weren't so green around the gills.” He leaned back. “Is Laura and our babies awake?”

Her breath caught, and she wished for one fleeting moment that he wouldn't restrain himself, green gills and all. “Not yet. Want me to get them?”

“Better, I figured on making Cuthand today.”

At the mention of the settlement named after the old Indian scout, a shiver ran up her spine and stabbed her heart. She'd been to the trading post there many times and played under the big oak in front of the blacksmith forge at the livery. Cuthand was a part of her childhood. Her stomach rolled.

Almost home, she didn't know if she could stand it. A part of her wanted to beg Levi to take her and Charley and run the other direction, but instead, she steeled her resolve and prepared herself to march back to the boarding house and get her boy ready to go.

She hated that day so many years ago. Being stolen still impacted her life – and now her son's – every day in such negative ways.

Remembering the horrible incident, revulsion rose up in her heart toward Swift Arrow and Little Beaver. Her mother had taught her the importance of forgiveness.

From her childhood days to just before she got married to now, her words still echoed - refusing to forgive is like petting a rattler and expecting the other guy to get bit. Only hurts the one holding tight to the evil doing, never the evildoer.

Rose had truly tried in earnest to forgive them, made a conscious effort, but then when she thought of that day....

Through breakfast then packing up to get back on the trace, she swallowed the dread, forced it down where her morning sickness lived. Then finally aboard the gelding and on the trace, she rode toward her fate.

The ache in her heart grew with each step the horse took. Back to Charles. Levi leaving. She couldn't stand it. Couldn't do it. Any of it.

Around midmorning, without a word, her ranger reined Shooter to a stop. For several heartbeats, he looked around as though lost in thought.

She waited a long time silently then thought better of it.

"Something wrong, Levi?"

He focused on her. "No, just remembering."

She studied him for a moment, then an old conversation with her little girlfriend wormed its way up. "After you got back from Tennessee, and the whole of Red River County celebrated your aunt and uncle getting married, Rebecca told me about a skunk guy you had to shoot when that old charlatan tried to rob y'all. This where it happened?"

He nodded. "Right over there." He threw his chin toward a spot a little off the trace. "First man I ever shot." He shook his head. "Heard later Littlejohn, that's the thief's name, left Skunk up on Sugar Hill. Guy got gangrene and died, just like I wished on him."

She did the mental math. "What were you then? Fourteen?"

Nudging Shooter back into a walk, he chuckled. "Yes, ma'am. Thought I' all grown up."

"Amazing how young we were when you look back. Only fifteen when I married and got stolen." The gelding matched the stallion's pace. "Seems like we both had to grow up too fast, don't you think?"

"Life does that sometimes, especially in Texas." Another wry little chuckle danced from his smile. "That night, I saw the real Henry Buckmeyer for the first time."

"I remember Rebecca talking about that, too. She was so proud of her new daddy. Bragging on how he pointed his pistol at that guy..." She looked to him.

"Littlejohn."

"Yeah, him, the one holding a knife to your aunt's throat."

"Yes, ma'am. I can still see Uncle Henry when he told Littlejohn." Levi looked at her, clinched his teeth, and made a horrible face. "I've killed seven men. Beat one of them to death with my bare hands. You'll be number eight if you spill one drop of her blood. Now let her go."

Silence reigned for a ways, then it struck her. "Life repeats itself, doesn't it?"

"Yes, it does. Matter of fact, later I asked Uncle Henry what he would have done if Littlejohn hadn't given up and let her go."

She waited for him to continue, but when he didn't she spoke up. "What did he say?"

"Aim high and shoot."

She smiled and rubbed under the edge of her bonnet. "I never told you, but when you shot that yap, you singed some of my hair."

"Did I now?"

"Yes, sir, but I sure am proud you knew what to do."

"So am I. Never dreamed I'd ever have to use that piece of advice, but, well." He shrugged. "If it wasn't for my Uncle Henry, Wallace and I would've been dead men a long time ago."

She thought about that for a while, searching her memory of any stories Rebecca had told about her daddy, Levi, or Wallace Rusk, and nothing came to mind. "So tell me true exactly what you're talking about, mister."

He laughed. "About what?"

She loved his stories, especially about the part of his life she knew nothing of. The sound of his voice soothed her troubled heart. She could listen to him talk the rest of her life and never tire of it.

"You and Wallace and Henry, him saving you two."

He looked off like either seeing the past or trying to decide exactly what or maybe how much to share. Why were men like that? So guarded all the time, acting like if they let someone know the real them, it'd be over.

While Charley worked his filly in his normal double time circles, Levi told her about him and his Uncle Henry finding Wallace on the road to join up with Sam Houston.

"I was eighteen. Wallace was sixteen, and neither one of us knew anything about war or what to expect."

"You and Wallace have been riding together for eight years?"

"Yes, ma'am. He's the brother I never had, maybe even more than that."

She smiled but made no comment. Shortly, he went back to his story about the battle of San Jacinto and Uncle Henry saving the two of them. From there, he told her of his early days of rangering.

How and when he first met Ward. He continued, in a strange, very matter-of-fact manner. He didn't have Wallace's flare for gab, but did make her believe she was right there.

He stopped at the edge of a creek, turned around, and looked at the wagon. "We best wait for Wallace to cross."

"Why?" She giggled. "He's a big boy."

He dismounted and went to pulling his boots off. "This is the worst branch of White Oak Creek. We spent a day and a half being stuck right here."

Wading into the shin-high water, he walked back and forth close to the bank then stepped out and drew two lines in the dirt leading into the water. He tiptoed to a nearby pine and leaned against it putting his boots back on.

She noticed a hole in one of his socks. Would she have the chance to sew it up?

Despite the distraction of his reminiscing, the dread still hung over her heart like a death shroud and threatened to erupt from her core, rising again and again, burning her throat.

Life without Levi would not be one at all. But how could she go against God? He hated divorce. Maybe it could be true that Charles, thinking she'd been killed, remarried and loved a new wife and fathered a passel of kids with her.

But who would he choose? Her or the new lady?

Shortly, Wallace drove the wagon into the creek exactly at the spot Levi marked. Maybe only half an hour later, he did it all over again on the second branch of the White Oak. The trace sloped down into the Sulphur River bottoms where the oaks and pines gave way to bois d'arc and scrub.

She'd spent two weeks late one summer helping her brothers and father gather the big green horse apples. What? Had to be ten years ago right there in those very bottoms.

That shroud, like a storm cloud, darkened and weighed heavier on her heart the closer she got to the river. It tried to smother all hope. The twisted and gnarly trees that lined the trace reminded her exactly what her life would be if she had to spend the rest of hers with Charles.

Oh, Lord, please make a way.

Then she was there. As though it was nothing, Levi waded Shooter into the slow-moving flow. Charley burst past her on his filly splashing through and caught up with his partner.

Like the gelding could sense her trepidation, he stopped and stood on the shore. Levi turned in the saddle and looked at her from the other side.

He smiled and beckoned her with a slight nod.

No denying he was right. No matter how hard, left with no choice but to face her husband, she would do what she must. Not for her sake, but Charley's—and Levi's.

Be strong for them. At least, that wouldn't come until the day after tomorrow. She nudged her heels into the gelding's ribs.

Home.



A chill bit at Laura, but sitting the hard wagon bench wasn't as hurtful as it'd been a few days ago, and she sure was thankful for that. She snuggled Lacey in tighter. "This here the Sulphur?"

Wallace glanced over. "Yes, ma'am, sure is." He went back to his mule skinning. "Isn't much farther."

That didn't comfort her one smidge. How could she stand to see her Wallace spooning another girl? Probably no doubt Rebecca were beautiful as the captain claimed 'cause she never heard him lie.

Would her fella take one look at his dream lady then never have eyes for her or Lacey again? A knot rose in her throat. She swallowed hard, but it pushed the tears out anyway. She swiped at her cheek.

Maybe the woman would already have her a beau, anyways. If only. She looked toward the blue sky.

Oh, Lord, please let it be so.

The tears kept on coming, more than before, and she wiped more seriously at 'em.

He glanced her way. "Something wrong?"

She ducked her head and went to tucking the purty little baby blanket tighter around her sleeping daughter. She wished she could stop the tears, but they just wouldn't quit.

And she couldn't quit wondering if he loved Lacey enough or believed her when she told him what a good wife she'd make him.

Even if she had a chance, she wouldn't do nothing to try and sway him. He had to make up his own mind, and if he chose Levi's sister, then Laura would accept it as best she could and never do or say anything to make him feel bad about his choice.

Still, the thought hurt her heart bad. Where would she go?

He bent over and tilted his head toward her. "What's the matter? Are you crying, Laura?"

She straightened up shaking her head pretty fast. She wiped a cheek again then smiled at him still crying. A Bible verse she been studying on came to mind. "No, I be just fine."

Wallace shook his head. "Thou shall not bear false witness." He raised both brows. "It's one of the big ten; means don't tell a lie."

She dropped her jaw. How dare him. "I ain't fibbing. I'm good." "Then why were you crying?"

She didn't want to even admit it, much less tell him, but he was right. Her soul really wasn't all that good. "Well, maybe I stretched the truth just a smidgen."

"Alright, so what were you crying then lying about?"

She took a deep breath then looked him in the eye. "Oh, I just been pestering myself 'bout Rebecca and all."

"What about her?"

"Oh nothin' 'bout her, really. More about you, I guess." She fingered the blanket to shade her daughter's face. "See, I done know God has a plan. For me and my little girl here. Just ain't sure it matches up with mine. That's all." She looked up into his eyes. "Lacey wants you to be her pap so bad."

Chapter

Twenty-Seven

Wallace nodded at Laura and looked back to the trace. For the next quarter mile or so, he didn't speak. He wanted both of his baby girls, but he couldn't pull the trigger on asking her to marry him.

He'd wanted to be Levi's brother and Henry's son for so long now, and winning Princess Rebecca would make all that so simple. But then Laura came along complicating everything.

"Lacey tell you that?"

Laura tilted her head. "Sort o'." She smiled. "Mostly it be how she looks at'cha. Her little peepers all wide eyed, like she hoping hard you's her pap."

"I want that, too. But for right now, let's wait and see how things shake out. You may even change your mind. Who knows what tomorrow holds?"

For a ways, she didn't say a word then went to wiping at her cheeks again.

He leaned over and looked. "Why are you crying again?"

She sniffed, swiped some more at her cheeks, then shook her head. "It be that mare, ain't it? How I bought 'er."

He hated to think about her and the livery man and didn't care to conjure up any mental pictures. Was that part of why he couldn't agree with himself to marry her?

"Oh, I don't know about that. I've done a bunch of things I'd like to take back myself."

She ducked. "Would you and Captain of gone and stretched my neck iffing I had of stealed her?"

"Maybe. You saying that's what you really did?"

She shook her head. "No. I pondered hard on it, but reckoned the good Lord'd be the one to forgive me quicker than the law iffing I's to take her without paying something." She shrugged. "My goodness gracious, didn't know what t'do, Wallace. Only that I had to get out of there."

The trace sloped steady upward. While mostly bois d'arc and

scrubby trash trees shaded the bottoms, they gave way to tall straight pines, stately oaks, and a smattering of sweet-smelling cedar as Levi led the way north.

He loved home being so close, but downright hated the thought of facing Charles Nightengale.

He'd been rehearsing exactly what he'd say for days, but how could he tell the man that he was in love with his wife?

A dog-run cabin surrounded by a good ten acre block of black land—laid by, waiting for spring planting—caught Levi's eye and pulled him from his ruminations. He faced Rose. "You pick much cotton?"

"Some, but shucked more corn than anything."

"Why's that? Didn't your family plant lint?"

"Oh, sure. Daddy did. That was our main cash crop, but the brothers didn't like me riding on their sacks once I got tired." She laughed. "Tending to the horses was my main job growing up. For some reason, sitting for hours stripping husks off corncobs then grinding them into feed for my ponies seemed fun, but pulling lint and filling up a big old sack dragging behind? I hated it with a passion. Hurt my hands." She studied her fingertips as though remembering the effort and pain.

Caused him to check his own. The scars had faded, but not the memory of the backbreaking work. "In '32, the year we took those sixteen bales on the trace, I would have quit a dozen times early on, but Auntie wouldn't have it

She dragged herself out to our bottoms every morning before the sun and stayed working until the last bit of light. How could I not be out there with her? Plowing and planting. Hoeing was the worst."

She laughed again, a soft, sad sort of chuckle like a cry lurked underneath it. "I was chopping cotton when I met Charles."

A stab of jealousy nicked his heart, but he wanted to hear about the man. Always a good thing to know your enemy. "That so?"

"Yes, sir. He'd been scouting timberland and just happened by that day. Told me later it was love at first sight." She fell silent as Charley trotted by, then once he passed out of ear shot, resumed. "I can't wish my son away, but—" She choked, eased the gelding closer. "If I could change things—"

"Don't beat yourself up over the past." He reined Shooter over to where his leg and hers touched; he leaned some toward her until his shoulder made contact as well. "Things will be settled day after tomorrow."

She sniffed. "It was his hair."

He leaned back and looked at her. "What about his hair?"

"That's what struck me. Oh, don't get me wrong, he was one good-

looking man for sure. But his great head of hair caught my attention first; that, then him finishing up hoeing my row.”

She reached over and tugged on his duster until his shoulder was back against hers, like it was easier for her to tell her story if he wasn’t looking right at her.

“I’d never been courted before, and Charles knew exactly what to say, how to say it, and what to do. Mama and I wouldn’t listen to Daddy or the brothers. All of them were totally against him being a suitable beau, but we wore them down. Next thing they knew, I was married.”

Another place came into view. A sawed-lumber house with two big log barns in front of several black land blocks. Some of them grew nice stands of wheat or oats.

A split-rail fence along the trace set the homestead off; lots of fences going up. The shades of green and black land warmed Levi’s heart. Didn’t know of another place in Texas that had those exact colors.

He hunted for someone to howdy, but other than a lazy looking hound draped across the front porch steps, didn’t seem to be anyone home. He leaned into Rose. “Pretty sure, if I’m remembering right, the Cuthand trading post and livery is less than a mile up the road.”

She bumped him hard then pulled away. “We staying there tonight?”

He looked at her. “Thought we would. We can’t make it home by dark anyways.”

She smiled, but it was hollow. He wanted more than anything to wipe the forced one away and put a real one on her lips, but he didn’t know how.

Not now. Not until something was finally settled. It just had to work out his way.

Soon enough, he and Rose reached the little community. He directed Wallace to the livery and parked the wagon under the big red oak tree across from it.

Once the stock got hayed, grained, and stalled, and Laura and Rose worked together on supper, he and Wallace eased over to the trading post. A young lady flitted a feather duster over a row of jars that rested on shelves along the far wall.

“Evening, ma’am.”

She turned around, glanced at him, then studied hard on Wallace. “Evening, gents. Can I help you find something?” She stared right at his partner, though talking to the both of them.

Levi grinned. “Got any newspapers?”

She climbed off the stepladder then hustled to the front counter and pulled out a stack of yellowed oversized newsprint. She scanned

them then set the bunch down. "We've got one of last week's Northern Standards out of Clarksville, an Austin Daily Texian, but it's more than a month old. and there's still a spring issue of the National Intelligencer from Washington, too. Any of those interest you?"

"What do you want for the three?"

"How does a dollar sound?"

Wallace leaned in and frowned. "A little like highway robbery, I'd say. Captain Baylor here may just take you into custody if you don't watch it." He obviously had to work at keeping a straight face.

She looked at his partner then to him. "You Levi Baylor? The Texas Ranger?"

He tipped his hat. "Yes, ma'am."

She returned her gaze to Wallace. "Then you've got to be Wallace Rusk." She extended her hand, and he took it. She smiled a teeth dazzling, eye sparkling grin. "Pleased to meet you, Mister Rusk; real pleased."

"That's him alright. Now back to the papers. Would you take two bits?"

"What?" She tore her eyes away from Wallace and faced him again. "Now who's trying to rob who? Why, we've got more than that in the Intelligencer alone." She raised one eyebrow. "Tell you what I'll do. I'll take two bits for the Austin and Clarksville rags, but ninety cents is the best I can do on all three." She turned her attention back to Wallace who still held her hand. "I've been reading about you two men."

Wallace smiled. "You have? They telling lies about us again?"

"I don't know. Get the captain here to buy the papers then you can read all about it and tell me if it's true or not."

Levi tapped the counter. She glanced over at him. "Fine, I'll give you six bits for the three."

"Can't do it. Daddy would tan my hide. He turned down four bits for just the Washington paper, so I need to get full price for it. Truth be known, I really shouldn't have come down at all." She dipped her chin to where she looked out from under thick lashes. "But since I already said ninety, Daddy'll just have to live with it."

She was working him, but from the looks of things, she appeared to be working Wallace harder. It wasn't really the money so much. If she'd said two dollars to start with, he'd been happy to give her ninety cents.

Not like the papers were current. He fished in his vest pocket and pulled out a silver dollar. "Here, I'll take all three. Don't want you losing any hide."

She scooped up the coin, stuck it in her apron pocket, and pulled out five pennies and a nickel. She put them in Levi's hand without

ever taking her eyes off Wallace. "Thank you, sir. I appreciate your business."

Levi tucked the newspapers under his arm and turned. He stopped next to his partner who still held the young lady's hand. "You coming?"

He nodded and backed away a step before tipping his hat.

"Evening, ma'am."

"There's a social tonight."

Wallace stopped. "That so?"

"Yes, sir. Over to the new Methodist Church building. I was fixing to close up and head there myself when you men wandered in. Why don't you come? You'd be welcomed."

Levi tipped his hat and walked out; he wasn't much into church socials anymore. Used to like going for the food as a growing boy. Halfway back to the wagon, it dawned on him.

After tomorrow, he might not see Rose anyplace else. If it didn't work out, if he couldn't have her, could he stand even riding through the county she lived in?

The thought of being around her and not even able to hold her hand sent a chill down his back. Would there always be a hole in his heart that only she could fill?

He reached the wagon just as the sun melted into the western horizon. Charley ran toward him then launched himself at the last second. Levi leaned over, caught the boy, then swung him around. "You my littlest partner?"

He hugged his neck tight then leaned back and studied the bundle under his arm. "Yes, sir! Me am! What's them?"

"Newspapers. I got 'em for my Uncle Henry."

"Who him?"

"My uncle. You'll meet him tomorrow."

He wiggled down then grabbed Levi's hand and pulled. "Hurry."

"Where we going?"

"Big party." He tugged harder. "Come on."

Rose stood and shook her head. "Not now, Charley. We haven't eaten supper yet. Slow down and give your partner a minute." She wrapped her arms around the boy and held him tight. Looking at Levi, she questioned him with her eyes.

He pouted his bottom lip. "Might be fun." He turned to Wallace. "You and Laura want to go?"

His partner grabbed his arm and Charley's hand. "Excuse us men a moment, ladies." He picked up the boy then walked around to the other side of the wagon. In a whispered tone, he asked, "What do you two say to giving the girls their surprises a day early?"

Levi moseyed back around near the fire.

Rose handed him a plate. "What are you smiling about?"



Laura's new dress fit perfectly, and prettier than she ever had in her whole life, her first ever store-bought dress. That one back in Austin, but it were more a tent to cover her belly proper.

With every step she took, its full, deep purple skirt shone in the golden light of the oil lamps lighting the way to the church building. Her sleeves' lacy cuffs made her hands look so small and pretty; almost like a real lady's.

She cradled the baby in her right arm and strolled beside Wallace like they were a married couple heading to high tea or whatever fancy folks did of an evening. The oil lamps led Levi and Rose who walked up in front.

Charley rode the captain's shoulders to the new sawed-board church house that lay a few hundred yards east and a little north of the Trading Post intersections. The lawn and building's porch already teamed with folks.

Rose turned and smiled. "You look beautiful, Laura. I don't know how these two got such perfect sizes. Must have been some divine help, you think?"

Wallace walked on ahead and spoke to Levi.

"Yes, ma'am, I be guessing something just like that. That sky shade sure is your color, matches ya red hair like a plow horse to its own collar. And I just love all that blue trim, and all the little flowers. It's plum perfect."

"Titus called it calico. I liked all those lines on it, too." Levi grinned at Rose. "Can't think of a color or shade wouldn't be yours."

Laura scanned the crowd, and movement caught her eye. A young woman extracted herself from a group of older ladies sitting around a roaring bonfire and walked straight toward them. Appeared to be in a hurry.

She grinned at Rose and Laura. "Hey, y'all, I'm Skeeter. So glad you folks came." She turned her attention to Wallace. "Told my father about you. Said he'd be proud to meet a Texas Ranger and hear all about Plum Creek or chasing Buffalo Hump and his band to the coast.

Truth be known, you could probably tell any old adventure you'd be so kind to share, and he'd be happy as a hen on a June bug." She looked to Levi. "Course, you too, Captain Baylor."

"Oh, Wallace tells the tales. Living 'em was enough for me."

Laura watched this Skeeter person hook her arm right into Wallace's and hustle him away. Her mouth fell open as the man's backside disappeared into the church building. She looked at Rose. "Well, in all my born days, I ain't never."

Levi leaned in close. "It's the storytelling, not the lady, that interests him. Don't pay him no mind."

She nodded, but was it the truth? How could she ever think she could win someone like Wallace Rusk anyways? Next to the captain, he was probably the most famous Texas Ranger of them all.

Once inside, she found herself a chair in the far corner and plopped down. At least, she had her pretty little Lacey, but what was she going to do? Maybe she could find someone going south and west who could drop her off at her daddy's.

Who knew if he's even still there, though? And even if he was, what would he think about her bringing home a half-breed baby? He had enough trouble feeding all his own young 'uns.

Wallace had seemed to be plenty smitten with his little namesake, but maybe Lacey wasn't as special as she wanted to think. Could be that he cooed at every newborn came along.

She searched the crowded church building, but didn't see Wallace, so she turned her attention to the baby and wiggled her tiny chin. "What you be thinkin', Mama's sweet girl? Think he done gone and forgot usin's?" She traced Lacey's pudgy cheek; the baby rewarded her with a big smile.

"Thirsty?"

"What?" She looked up. Wallace stood in front of her holding a small jar of brown liquid.

"Asked if you're thirsty, thought you might like some apple cider." He held it out.

"Why, thank you kindly." She took the offering. "Where be your friend?"

He pulled out the empty chair next to her, turned it to where it faced her, then sat. "Who you talking about?"

"That Skeeter gal." She looked away and muttered mostly under her breath. "Who'd ever call their little baby after a blood suckin' bug anyways?"

He laughed. "Forget about her."

"Why would I? She be hanging all over on ya like you's her beau home from the war or somethin'. Ain't never seen the likes."

He patted her hand. "Really, don't worry about it. Folks just like hearing about what we have been up to." He shrugged. "I like bragging on Levi, but that's it."

She hoped that was the truth. The beautiful Rebecca hanging over her head like a hangman's noose was bad enough, but if any swaying skirt and pretty face could turn his head; well, what was a gal to do?

Chapter

Twenty-Eight

Captain Bay-lor! Don't leave me!"

Levi's eyes popped open, but his night vision lingered. He shook off the image of riding away with Charley hollering after him. Flat out wasn't going to happen.

He'd given up the best horse he'd ever owned for Rose and her boy. They belonged to him. He allowed himself a chuckle. He'd traded for Rose twice now, but even that memory couldn't shake his littlest partner's desperate cries that still remained in his ears and in his heart.

That morning after breakfast and all that getting his troupe headed out took, Charley's dream-screaming at him echoed again in his mind's ear. He couldn't shake it and didn't ever want to hear the sound in real life.

The lady herself didn't seem too chipper either considering she was fixin' to finally be home. And if sweet Laura looked any more morose, he wouldn't be able to set a gaze on her at all.

Wallace sat on the other side of her on the wagon bench. He tried his best to hide his excitement, but Levi knew his partner too well not to see the little-boy anticipation in his eyes.

At last, Levi would get the two people he loved most in the world together. But if he got to choose, would he pick Wallace for Rebecca? Or even the other way around?

If his partner didn't marry Laura, the poor girl's heart would be broken for sure, but females her age got over lovesickness pretty quick once a new beau came along.

He thought about himself settling down, being a family man. He could see it alright, but couldn't imagine that he and his friend would really be done with rangering. Who knew what the future held?

Still, some peace and quiet with Rose and Charley – it's what he'd pick for sure right about now. One way or another, he would not leave her or his little partner so long as he had anything to say about it.

He figured—at least hoped—she saw things the same way.

Late morning, he turned from north to east-by-northeast on a less traveled side trail. He reined Shooter in on the top of a hill under a

tall pine and turned to Rose who had been riding next to him lost in her own thoughts.

Pointing, he waved his arm in a wide arc to the north, from west to east. "This is where it starts, mine and Uncle Henry's land. We're getting close. Want to stop here and put on your new dress?"

She nodded. Filled to the brim, her eyes looked on the verge of overflowing, but she opened them wide and gave him a half-smile. Her quivering bottom lip almost broke his heart. "What are we going to do?"

He swung out of the saddle and held his hand out. She took it and slipped off into his arms. For too few heartbeats, he held her then took both her hands and looked into her eyes.

"Today, we are going to be happy and give thanks for being home, seeing the family. Tomorrow, we'll deal with whatever we have to."

Wanting to agree, she swallowed hard, but failed to hold back her tears any longer. They rolled down her cheeks. "Can't we go somewhere? California maybe?"

"Running away is no answer."

She stood up straight, swiped at her cheeks, and obviously did her best to keep her bottom lip still. "I'll always love you, Levi Baylor."

He blinked away his own tears. "I've never loved anyone like I love you, Rosaleen. Didn't even know there was such a feeling. Got a mighty big place in my heart only you can fill."

She bit her bottom lip like she knew she shouldn't have said what she had already and didn't dare say anything more. The wagon neared then pulled to a stop.

Levi threw Wallace a nod. "Our property starts here, mostly all you can see that direction. We're real close to the house. Figured the ladies would like putting on their party threads."



Laura took Wallace's hand and climbed aboard again. She adored her new dress and bonnet, but even more that Wallace bought it for her without her even hinting or saying anything about it.

Surely that meant he loved her. But with each turn of the wagon wheel, the heaviness in her heart increased. Then they turned off the trail onto a more traveled road.

A little piece up the way, the captain pointed to a pile of rocks. "That's our original boundary marker. I can still remember when Dad and Uncle Andy gathered those stones; must have been about Charley's age because Dad passed when I was five."

Wallace said something back to the captain, but Laura didn't hear exactly what. The time she dreaded for so long had come. It hung over

her like a dark thunderhead about to explode and rain pain and disappointment down on her head and heart.

She glanced at her ranger. Was this the day she would lose him forever? She sighed and snuggled her baby in close.

If only he were Lacey's real pap, she'd have him for sure.

A few miles further north, Levi stopped next to a tree-lined lane. A small block of black dirt, plowed and ready for planting, lay on the north side. He pointed up the road. "We're here."

Wallace drove the wagon past another bigger, dark green block—maybe eight or ten acres—with wheat or oats. Laura never was able to tell the difference, but didn't matter much.

Nothing mattered now but hanging onto the man she wanted for her baby's pap—and the one she wanted to be her husband more than she'd ever wanted anything in her whole life.

What would she do if Rebecca stole his heart away?

She wanted to cry every tear or scream her insides out or run away to the farthest corner of the wild west territory—maybe all the way to California. But how could she?

She couldn't even run to her own family. And what would she scream? I love Wallace Rusk and want him to be mine alone forever? She hooked her arm through his; it seemed so natural.

He patted her hand, but didn't say anything.

Just past the bigger block of winter grass, nestled in next to a dry creek, a small log house belched a steady stream of smoke. Levi, who rode next to Wallace's side of the wagon, nodded toward the structure. "Our first home here. Uncle Henry and I turned it into a smokehouse."

The wagon crossed a heavy timber bridge and rolled up a little hill. A really big block of farmland unfolded before the wagon on both sides of the road. Like the smaller plot earlier, its rich black dirt sat prepared awaiting spring planting.

How could the captain's family work so much land? Miss Sassy said they only had baby girls and the biggest could be, what? Ten or eleven years old?

On past that seventy or eighty acres, the road topped a little knoll exposing more farmland and a beautiful small lake to the north. Timber surrounded another field of plowed black dirt at the bottom of a rolling hill.

Laura couldn't even imagine owning so much property. Just before the bottomland, the road turned left and headed uphill again. She'd seen some pretty places in her days, but never nothing like this.

At the top of the hill sprawled a two story, sawed-board house like the ones she'd seen in Austin, only prettier and fancier with lots of little scrolls and swoop do-daddies. The captain's family must be plenty rich; she'd never dreamed Rebecca was a real princess, but

maybe it could work in her favor.

Maybe she did have a chance of winning her Wallace's heart after all. Her pap always said money ran to money; and far as she knew, her ranger didn't have that much, not that it mattered any to her. She weren't after his purse, only wanted his heart, and she wanted that more'n any other thing.

A single ray of hope left a bit of brightness in her soul, but the storm cloud still loomed tall and dark and threatening. She hated the doubt. She hated that him and the captain was so close, and she hated Rebecca Ruth Baylor even though she'd never met her. She looked to the sky and silently prayed.

Lord, please don't let her want my Wallace. Let her love someone else or have a big wart on her nose. Amen.

Several little girls sat in a circle on the broad front porch, all looking hard in the center. The littlest one facing out looked up and pointed toward the wagon. Another one turned then got up and hopped off the porch. She held her hands to her cheeks and squealed and jumped up and down.

The captain spurred his horse up the hill, jumped off, then scooped the closest one into his arms. The others ran toward him howling his name.

"Mama! Daddy! Come quick!"

"Levi's here! Hurry!"

"Rebecca! Levi's home!"



Wallace reined the mules to a stop short of the front hitching post, set the brake, then stepped down. Sassy dismounted, fetched Charley off the filly, and then tossed Wallace the reins of both their horses.

With her son in her arms, she walked toward the gaggle of little girls hugging on Levi. Folks poured out of the house, both white and to his surprise, black.

Had Levi ever mentioned his family owning slaves?

Then she waltzed through the door, stared only a moment before she burst into a run to join her sisters mobbing the captain. Rebecca Baylor. How long had he waited? How long had he dreamed?

His heart stopped dead. He tried but couldn't swallow. The lady was exactly as he'd pictured her, except maybe even prettier than her brother claimed.

All the chatter and laughs and hugs warmed Wallace's heart. He'd never seen anything like it. Not ever.

Laura slipped up beside him. He looked down. Tears filled her eyes. The last thing he ever wanted was to hurt her, but she had to

understand. She sniffed then wiped her cheeks. He looked back to his partner's sister-cousin. Mercy! To call her beautiful would be a slight.

Colonel Buckmeyer eased down the steps with a pregnant lady on his arm, had to be Levi's Aunt Sue. The littlest lady—around Charley's age—hung back clinging to her mother's skirt. The colonel stood beside her with his arm around her exceptionally-extended waist. She must be overdue.

The hugs and kisses flowed, then the squeals started over again when Rebecca noticed Sassy and Charley.

"Rosaleen Fogelsong!"

"Yes, ma'am, in the flesh."

Tears flowed. Wallace had to blink away a few himself, then it was his and Laura's turn. He howdied the colonel and Miss Sue; then Levi with a little Buckmeyer lady on each side, introduced him.

"Bitti Beck, this is Wallace Rusk. Partner, meet my sister Rebecca Ruth Baylor."

Wallace bowed, like some fancy man, then immediately wished he hadn't. "Levi lied about you, Miss Rebecca."

She looked a little startled from him to her brother then back. "How's that?"

"Captain claimed you were beautiful, and that word... It just doesn't do you justice."

She smiled. "Well, thank you, Mister Rusk, that's very kind of you. And if the papers are to be believed, I owe you for saving my brother from certain death on numerous occasions."

Wallace wanted to agree, but bit back the words; he couldn't start out lying to her. "Truth be told, it was the other way around. Now your brother did leave me alone too many times in too many saloons, but I'm a changed man now."

"Indeed! Guess you'll have to tell me the real story sometime."

"Love to." Why? Why had he said that word? Would she take it wrong? Would Laura? Laura! He'd forgot all about her. He turned sideways, withdrawing his arm from her grip then used it to point her out. Good gracious, he was acting like an idiot.

Laura gave him a weird look.

Rebecca smiled.

"May I introduce my friend, Laura Langley."



His friend? His friend!

Laura faced the beautiful princess and willed her lips to smile pleasantly; she would keep her words to a few. "Pleased to meet you, ma'am."

“Don’t you be ma’aming me, call me Rebecca. It’s good to meet you, too.”

Her face burned, it must be a bright red. She uncovered the baby in an attempt to draw the attention away from herself. “And this here’s my little Lacey Rose.”

“Oh, she is beautiful, Laura. You must be so proud.”

She squatted to show her off to all the little Buckmeyer sisters, and promised all the young ladies they could have a turn at holding her once she woke up. Wouldn’t do for her to do or say anything more that would embarrass Wallace.

Someway, she had to make him see that a spoiled rich girl, no matter how pretty, wasn’t what he needed. But how? Her pap said you never hitched no race horse up to a plow, and you didn’t race no mules.

Nope, she and Wallace were perfect for each other, and somehow, someway, she had to make him see what she knew to be true.

Finally, the hugging and kissing ended, and this old slave mammy rang the dinner bell.

Laura had never seen anything that’d compare with the house’s insides. Why, the dining room were as big or bigger than Miss Sammie Jo’s lodge and everyone started sitting at the longest table she’d ever laid eyes on.

The biggest, brownest beautiful turkey sat atop a platter at one end. She went to counting spots, but Miss Sue interrupted her to show her where she could lay down her sleeping baby.

When she led her back into the Thanksgiving dinner, she gave her a seat across the table from Wallace. She couldn’t believe it. The princess and her mam helped them slaves carry in the rest of the food.

Then the darkies sat right down at the very same table with the family. Slaves didn’t eat with white folks.

If her pap were here, he’d get up and walk out. But he weren’t, and she wasn’t about to do no such a thing. She ain’t never eat such a meal or with such fancy silver.

Oh my, no. Guess it weren’t going to bother her none at all if the slaves ate. Not if it didn’t bother the high and mighty Buckmeyers.

Then the princess sat down. Right next to her Wallace. Now that just weren’t right, no way should she be acting like some saloon hussy throwing herself at a man obviously spoken for.

Why, for all she knew, Wallace could be Lacey’s pap. No, no, no. This weren’t right, not one chigger. She watched them like a hawk. Smiling an’ talking like they’s old friends. Touchin’ elbows. Nothing was right about it! None of it.

Old man Buckmeyer, a mighty handsome man, tapped his glass with a spoon then grinned. “Let’s pray.”

Everyone hushed and bowed their heads, but Laura couldn't not peek. At least, Wallace tore his eyes off the princess long enough to bow his head.

"Father God, what a blessing You have bestowed on our home this Thanksgiving Day. Our hearts are full of love and gratitude toward You. Thank You, Lord, for this food and for every soul who sits at our table. Bless it and them. Amen."

She liked short blessings. Seemed some preacher men thought they had to talk to the Almighty until the food got cold. The dinner tasted wonderful, except it were goin' to sour her milk if Wallace didn't stop grinning like a kid getting his first pup at Missy Prissy.

"So you were with the Comanche, too?"

She forced herself to pull her eyes off her man and the witchie woman casting her spell on him to face the darkie sittin' next to Wallace. "Yessum, that be right. Raiding party went and snatched me off my pap's place better'n a year ago."

The young man shook his head. "That's terrible. Praise God, you were rescued."

Nodding, she wondered if it were something to praise the Almighty over? She glanced at Wallace, all excited chatting with Levi's sister like Laura weren't sittin' right there across the table.

She gazed back to the light-skinned slave. She ain't never actually talked to a black man before.

He'd said something to the darkie sittin' next to her giving Laura the chance to look him over good. A right handsome man hisself, but what did a white person say to a slave?

"Yes, two hundred acres of cotton."

The words turned her head. Had she heard him right? That'd be a right powerful load of lint the man at the head of the table spoke of. "How can that be?"

Neither he or Levi seemed to hear her question; leastwise they didn't answer, but the darkie must have. He smiled at her like he were regular people, gave her a smile.

"Back home on the delta, we oversaw a thousand acres. Two hundred here will just be the start. Once we bust out more bottom land, we should be easily able to double that."

Wallace couldn't seem to take his peepers off Prissy Missy even long enough to eat his food. Didn't look like he'd even ate one bite. Her chest tightened, and she looked back to the young black man who smiled with the whitest pearly whites she done ever seen. "And where be home?"

He sat down his fork. "New Orleans used to be, but I came here about a year ago. Mister Henry made a deal with my father right after we were emancipated."

She didn't know that word. Seemed this darkie weren't no regular kind of slave. "That so? I heard tell that New Orleans gots lots of them river steamboats? You ever rode on one?"

"Just the once, on the trip here. It was truly grand."

She figured it had to be, cutting through the water without lifting a finger. Wallace kept himself so in Princess Rebecca's business, it were plain sickening. She glanced back to the darkie, but he weren't really so dark, and his hair weren't nappy at all, kind of wavy and soft looking instead. She'd like to touch it.

Some slaves were mixed blood, part white and part black, made them a real purty creamy chocolate color. Just like her Lacey were part Indian. They even had a word for them—not half-breeds like part Indian—but she couldn't bring it up.

Maybe that's what he meant about his pap making a deal with the Buckmeyers. She shook her head at the thought. How could a man do such a thing? "I's truly sorry your pap done sold you to Mister Henry, and you had to leave your home."

The darkie laughed. "No, I apologize. I never meant to mislead you. My whole family moved here together. That's my father." He pointed his fork toward an older slave with a heavy frostin' over his ears sittin' at the end of the table talkin' up a storm with the Captain and his Uncle. "We're all freemen now. Our master set us free when he died, but even before that, he didn't treat us like slaves."

She looked around the table. All the darkies were freemen? Just like her? "What were that word you used? Manciated?"

"Emancipated?"

"Yessum, that's it. Means you been set free?"

He flashed his pearly whites again; she liked his smile. "Yes, ma'am. Exactly right." He extended his hand and bowed his head slightly. "I'm Jean Paul."

"My name's Laura. I were a slave once, but the rangers emancipated me." She glanced at Wallace, who for some reason smiled back at her this time. Had he noticed she'd been having her own self a visit with this handsome freeman?

Maybe he'd gone and had hisself a twinge of regret over ignoring her so and paying so much attention to the precious princess. She looked back to the young man, batted her eyelashes, and smiled.

He gave her one slow nod then looked her right in the eye. "Guess we have something in common."

She nodded. Maybe this freeman were exactly what she needed to snatch her Wallace right out of the pretty princess's paws.

Chapter

Twenty-Nine

Levi tossed a good forkful of hay over the stall's gate then faced his uncle. "You know for sure Nightengale moved to St. Louis?"

"Yes, we've been hauling his timber to him for years now."

He leaned on the pitch fork. "Ever been to St. Louis?"

"A few times; nice enough place, but it isn't Texas." Henry looked to both ends of the barn then leaned in close. "What's going on with you and Rose, son?"

Levi studied his boots for a bit. This man wasn't blood, but for sure the closest thing he had to a father. He raised his head and looked him in the eye. "We love each other."

"She carrying your baby?"

"No, sir."

His uncle put a hand on Levi's shoulder and gave it a quick squeeze. "Seems to me you've gone and picked a hard row to hoe."

Levi laughed. "You took on me and Beck; Charley and this new baby couldn't be any worse."

"Point taken. You thinking of going up river?"

"Rose wants to run off, but I told her we had to face him."

"Well, I'd expect that of you. I take it she's going to ask for a divorce?"

"We're hoping he doesn't want her anymore, but if it comes to it, I'll...." Levi let the words drift off. He wasn't sure what he was going to do, but no way would he leave her and Charley with Nightengale. He couldn't.

"Divorce is an ugly business, but don't make the mistake Jackson did; get the paperwork right. Who knows, you might want to run for office one day. And for sure don't get into a fight with the man. Let the lawyers handle it. Lord knows we pay the bloodsuckers enough already."

Levi hated that getting back to the Red River Valley didn't mean the journey was going to be over, hated that he had to go all the way to Missouri, but he'd go anywhere and do anything it took to make Rose his own. "So, you got a fresh set of mules you'd care to trade?"

"For sure, but you can get there way faster taking the stage."

“The stage comes to Clarksville? When did that happen?”

“Couple of years now; the Belle runs from the square to Little Rock, from there it isn’t far to Memphis, then you could grab a steamboat all the way to St. Louis. Altogether, shouldn’t take more than ten days to two weeks at the most.”

“Two weeks? You sure about that?”

Henry laughed. “Oh, I might be off a day or two, but it beats mule skinning by a month of Sundays.”

Man, it sure would. Levi grinned. “Where’d Wallace put the wagon? I’ve got some things for the little ladies.” He lowered his voice. “I got you some newspapers, too, and I picked up two more head rights.”

“Excellent. You hear Clarksville has its own paper now?”

“Yes, sir. When did that happen?”

“Earlier this year. The Northern Standard. You’ll have to meet Charles DeMorse, the editor. Great guy.” He motioned for Levi to follow. “Come on, the wagon’s in the big barn.”



Rose wanted to cry, but instead, she smiled and made nice with each gift Levi passed out. Getting Charley a surprise, too, was just like him and one more reason that she loved him so.

How could life be so unfair? Why had Charles moved all the way to St. Louis? He’d claimed he loved Texas and would never go back. Rebecca said he waited a whole month before he lit out.

The afternoon and evening crawled by. She wanted to talk with Levi, find out what he planned. Did he even know? But between gifts and leftovers and him huddling with his Uncle Henry, she hadn’t gotten a private moment since arriving.

Then like someone had flashed a signal mirror letting everyone know she needed time with Levi, they all disappeared leaving just him and her in the parlor. He stood with his backside to the fire, warming himself.

Her inclination, what she wanted to do with every fiber of her being—to throw herself into his arms—proved almost too overwhelming, but she quashed the forbidden embrace and stayed out of reach.

“You heard?”

He nodded.

She eased closer, in case he wanted to hug her. “What are we going to do?”

“Uncle Henry says if we take the stagecoach to Memphis, and a steamboat from there we could be in St. Louis in ten days.”

She inched closer. "Oh, Levi! Ten more days." The words cut like a dagger to her heart. She wanted all the uncertainty to be over. She stared into the fire. "I can't believe Charles went back to Missouri. I want to be Mis'ess Levi Baylor, not Rosaleen Nightengale."

He nodded again. "I want that, too, but we've got to do it right, or it will haunt us for the rest of our lives." He laughed. "Uncle Henry mentioned President Jackson, all the trouble he had over his wife not getting a legal divorce from her first husband."

Divorce. God hated divorce. It said so right in the scriptures, but how could He want her to deny the love that filled her? How could He let her come to know and so admire this wonderful man then expect her to let him walk away? Hadn't He been the one who'd watched over her all those years with the Comanche? Then sent Levi to rescue her?

She inched closer then leaned forward. "I love you, Levi, so very much."

He kept his hands behind his back, but looked like he wanted to hold her as much as she wanted him to. "I love you, too, Rose, and I promise to do whatever it takes."

"There you two are."

She jerked back and turned around. The colonel and Miss Sue stood in the door. Rebecca hurried around her parents then pulled a rocking chair up next to the fire.

"I put Charley down in my room. He fell asleep sitting in my lap, listening to Wallace's stories." She looked to Levi. "You have got to be more careful, quit taking so many chances."

"To hear Rusk tell it, I'm ten feet tall, and he's a shade over nine."

The colonel slid a wingback overstuffed chair next to the rocker then helped Miss Sue ease into it. "No, his account sounded unblemished, much different than the stories in the papers about you two."

"He claims he's a changed man, perhaps he really did find God."

Miss Sue patted Rebecca's arm and looked to her nephew "Well, I'm with Rebecca. You boys need to stop running all over Texas and settle down, let someone else take care of things."

"Well, settling down is exactly what I want to do, Auntie, but before I can, we've got to make a trip north."

"We? Henry told me you were planning on going to St. Louis." Miss Sue looked from Levi to Rose. "You and Charley are welcome to stay for how long it takes Levi and Wallace."

"That's kind of you, ma'am, but..." She studied her lap. "We can't stay, Aunt Sue. We're going with him."

"Sweetheart, that wouldn't be proper; you two traveling alone all the way to St. Louis."

“Charley will be with us, and I couldn’t stand staying here. Besides, I have to face Charles. I’ll beg him to set me free if that’s what it takes.”

“A four-year-old isn’t much of a chaperone. Scripture tells us to abstain from all appearance of evil. You and Levi are going to have enough to overcome as it is. Divorce never bodes well. The whole situation....”

Rebecca rocked forward. “I’ll go with them.”

“So will I.”

Rose turned. Wallace stood in the parlor’s double wide opening, Laura a little behind him. She looked as though she would burst into tears at any moment. Or was that an I’m-about-to-kill-someone look? Rose couldn’t be exactly sure.

The colonel faced Rebecca. “Hold it right there. You can’t go. Your mother needs you here to help with this baby and your sisters.”

Laura stepped around Wallace. “Me and Lacey can go. Maybe I ain’t been no chaperone before, but sure as a hog wallers, I can handle it.”

Miss Sue tilted her head and smiled. “You don’t know what you’re volunteering for, sweetheart. Stagecoaches are horrible things, racing down the road. It’s constantly rocking side to side, and much harder travel than mules pulling a slow moving wagon. There’s no place for a newborn baby to sleep like in a wagon, either. No, you and Lacey will stay here.”

“Mother, they really don’t need anyone to go with them. Since when did we care what the old biddies said anyway? Levi and Rose have already been traveling together for, what? A month or more? What’s another ten days?”

Miss Sue grabbed her belly and faced her husband. “No, there needs to be someone that goes with them. At least five hundred folks are wanting you to run for president—or governor if we wind up joining the Union. I will not allow any scuttlebutt over anything to lessen your chances of winning office.”

Wallace stepped into the room. “There you go, and the captain could take over after the colonel’s done.”

Nodding, Miss Sue continued. “Yes; absolutely. Now see? Levi is ours, and Rose will be, too, soon as this mess gets all straightened out. They need to be above reproach for your sake as much as their own.” She held out her hand, and he took hers. She patted his. “I’ll be fine, my love. The baby’s got another month at the least. Rebecca would be back in plenty of time.”

Miss Sue’s words of acceptance into their family warmed Rose’s heart, but she didn’t want to wait another two minutes, much less two more weeks. She still couldn’t understand why Charles had to move

away. She closed her eyes.

“Oh, Lord, help me stand it.”

Rebecca stood and smoothed her skirt. “We’ll be going through Memphis, won’t we? I can stop by to see Grandfather. We could probably all spend one night there. Could you write him a letter, Mother?”

“I’ll be glad to. I’ll tell him if not on the way there, maybe you can pay a visit on the way back.” She clasped her hands around her unborn. “I know these two probably don’t want to wait any longer than they have to.”

Clearing his throat, Wallace smiled. “So it’s settled then. In the morning, Levi and I will go first thing and book passage for four, plus Charley. I suppose they charge for children, don’t they?” He turned to Rebecca. “How soon can you ladies be ready?”

She looked to Rose. “Would you prefer a few days of rest?”

Oh, how she would love that; she hated the thought of being on the road another two weeks. But more than her comfort, she wanted her destiny decided and healing for her heart—Levi’s, too.

No chance for that even existed until they could be together, rightfully before God and the world. She wanted to belong to him forever, but that could never happen while married to another.

“A few days here would be so nice, but whatever it takes, I want to get this over.” She turned toward the colonel. “Might there be one that leaves tonight?”

The man she hoped would soon be her uncle grinned. “Noon tomorrow’s the next one.” He faced Levi. “I’ll take you all in the morning, no need to make a special trip.”

“What if it’s all booked up?”

The colonel laughed. “Not a problem. You’re part owner in the Clarksville Belle.”

“When did that happen?”

“Last year. Seemed to me like a good investment. Come home more often, and you’ll find out all kinds of interesting information.”

Rose loved the relationship Levi had with his uncle and would have enjoyed listening to them talk all evening, but Becky stood and ushered her and Laura out as though it had been prearranged for Levi and Wallace to have time alone with Aunt Sue and Uncle Henry. No doubt they wanted to convince him what a mistake he was making.



He owned interest in a stage line. Levi loved it. No telling what all he, or rather his money, had gotten involved in. Henry pulled the parlor doors together from their hiding places in the wall then

returned to his seat next to Auntie. He faced Wallace. "I got you a piece of the Belle, too."

"Thank you, sir. I knew it was a smart move to let you manage my little daub of money."

Sue leaned over and patted his hand. "It's more than a daub now. We appreciate you watching out for our Levi."

His partner laughed. "More the other way around."

"Enough of that." His uncle-dad faced him. "You sure about Rose, son?"

"Yes, sir. I love her."

His aunt rubbed her big belly. All women must do that, maybe because it's so uncomfortable to be stretched like that. He couldn't imagine. "What about the baby, sweetheart? It won't be easy with so much prejudice."

He stood and walked over behind her then gently massaged her shoulders. "With Charley for a big brother, and me for a daddy, the baby will be fine."

"No, no, dear. I'm talking about you, not the little one. How are you going to feel about having a half-breed?" The only mother he'd ever known rolled her shoulders into the pressure. "Oh, you always had such a touch."

"Auntie, Rose didn't run off, she was stolen, and I'll love that baby as much as Uncle Henry loved me and Beck." He looked to his uncle. "How could I not?"

Sue patted his hand. "Well said. You're certainly a grown man, and without a doubt, you have our blessing. I'm so proud of you and thrilled that you've found true love." She looked at Henry and squeezed his hand. "Of course, it'll be our pleasure to throw you two a big wedding. The girls will all love that. What do you think? Mid-spring? The wild flowers will make a grand setting for a beautiful prairie ceremony."

Levi laughed. "That's a bit longer than we'd want to wait."

She twisted around in her seat and faced him. "But you'll have to, dear. It wouldn't be proper to marry so soon after Sassy, I mean Rose, divorces Nightengale."

Chapter

Thirty

The matched pair of blacks pulled the enclosed buggy away from the house. They was about as fancy as any horses Laura ever saw. She hated watching it go though; the pretty princess riding off in her Cinderella carriage.

Stealing Laura's Texas Ranger right there under her nose. Of all the nerve. Should of been punkin orange, not a boot black even darker than the two stallions hitched to it.

Tears escaped and ran down her cheeks. She swiped them away, glancing around to make sure no one saw her cryin'. It weren't fair. She'd gone and done everything but get down on her knees and beg him not to go.

She hated the Prissy Missy Rebecca and her sweeter than honey smile and her oh so miecey nicey ways. Probably still had all her teeth, too.

It were enough to make a body downright sick. How could a person be that happy and sugary all the time, every minute of the day? It just weren't right.

Laura wished she and Wallace never of come to the high and mighty Buckmeyers. Iffin she only knowed the truth ahead of time, she would of done talked Wallace out of it, no matter what it took.

Now she couldn't talk him out of nothing. He'd done gone and met his dream girl. How could she ever compete with the likes?

The grand lady-of-the-house's petticoats ruffled as she strolled toward her. Laura didn't want to smile, didn't feel at all like makin' friendly—what with everything going on.

Still, her ma always said two wrongs never made a right. She faced the captain's auntie and showed her choppers. Might not of looked much like a good smile though. How could it?

Her life were ruined, and now she'd never get married. Who'd ever want her and her half-breed baby? Little Lacey would never have a daddy.

The woman stopped beside her and wrapped her arm around Laura's waist. "It isn't over, sweetheart."

Although she heard them encouragin' words slip past Miss Sue's

lips, she didn't believe a one of them. Of course it were over. What female in her right mind could resist Wallace Rusk?

Other than the captain hisself, her ranger were about the finest kind of man ever drawed a breath in the whole Republic. Unable to end the dreadful tears, she wiped more off her cheeks.

"Miss Sue, Wallace told me he were dreaming about the captain's sister for years, and...." She looked to the perfect face of her baby girl. "Why would he want me after he done seen her? Your gal—she's about the most beautiful lady in all of Texas I s'pect, maybe the whole world."

The older lady rubbed her belly from top down to the bottom then lifted it. How many times had Laura done that exact same thing? She never would of thought to have something so simple in common with a woman so grand.

At the same time, she squeezed Laura's waist with her other arm.

Miss Sue laid her head over on Laura's shoulder then laughed real soft like. "I know Wallace Rusk would be a fine catch for any young lady, dear, but there's always the possibility Rebecca might not choose him for whatever reason. Why, no fewer than twenty eligible bachelors have come calling since she turned sixteen, but she's not picked one yet."

A smile started in her heart, but didn't quite make it to her mouth. The carriage drove out of sight. He didn't even look back at her or little Lacey Rose to wave or nothing.

Wallace never should of laid his peepers on that better-than-everybody-else gal, and Laura were being special nice 'cause a whole lot of more uglier names to call Rebecca raced across her mind.

"But was any of them suitors a brave and famous Texas Ranger that were so good looking you had to use a crow bar to pry your eyes off him?"

Miss Sue smiled. "I can't recall any rangers at all, but some powerful good-looking young men have hoped to court our Becky." The grand lady eased over and sat in a high-back willow chair that rested next to the wall.

Looking just like a queen on her throne, she patted the one next to her inviting Laura to sit. "And think how much gumption it took for them to get past her daddy? My Henry can be very intimidating."

She joined her and tickled Lacey who grinned the sweetest little grin she figured any baby ever did. Were right nice to sit and chew the fat on the fancy porch early of a mornin'.

Could thangs go her way? Her own smile made it after all. "Sure as a rooster crows of a mornin', I'd hate the colonel bein' upset with me, but Wallace don't seem to worry about it much. Not that Mister Buckmeyer would get upset. Seems to treat my Wallace like he were

his own kin.”

The lady laughed and nodded. “Yes, Henry’s been known to do that. But I’ve been on the receiving end of my husband’s wrath a time or two.”

But she prob’ly spit back more’n were throwed her way. Laura smiled at the thought of Miss Sue standin’ up to the colonel. She didn’t figure the lady were scared of nothing.

“Anyway, the reason I said it wasn’t over is that there’s one thing you can do that I believe will make a big difference in how Wallace sees you.”

“Really?” Laura gave the woman her whole ‘tention. “Is it a secret? Can you tell me what it might be?”

“Well, we are Texians, and live in an untamed country, but we still speak the King’s English. Henry’s mother taught English at a college in the east, and my Daddy—he lives in Memphis—is a judge. So we grew up with it. Have you been to school at all, sweetheart?”

Laura looked to her lap. “Went a few times, but I mostly stayed home and helped my Mam and Pap.” She looked back up into the woman’s eyes. “Miss Sassy were teaching me to read some though, and Wallace even learned me a bit.”

“That’s wonderful.”

“Yes, ma’am, but see, my pap—he didn’t cotton much to us young’uns skipping out on chores to go sit in no schoolhouse all the day long.” She looked up. “What king, Mis’ess Buckmeyer? Mister Sam Houston ain’t no king, is he?”

She smiled and patted her hand. “No, no, dear. He’s our president, but when someone speaks of the King’s English, they’re referring to the King of England.”

“England, English. That makes sense.”

“Although I suppose the Queen’s English might be more appropriate since Queen Victoria is the reigning monarch now, and she’s barely older than my Rebecca. Can you imagine such a thing?”

“Anyway, you and I will start at the beginning, and if you’re as smart as I think you are, a month will make a big difference. Are you willing to work at it?”

“Oh, yes, ma’am! Hard work never made me no never-mind. Pap always said I could hoe two rows to them lazy no counts’ one.” She sat back. “I’ll do anything if you think it’ll make a difference to my Wallace.”



Rose loved it, spending a night in a fancy feather bed and now riding in a grand buggy pulled by two high stepping black stallions. If only....

She stopped herself and focused on Levi and Charley. The captain's littlest partner sat on his lap with his arms folded across his chest staring out the window. She smiled.

Her boy would get over not wanting to leave all the Buckmeyer girls, but not taking him just wasn't an option. It may be the only time he would ever see his real father.

Oh, Lord, don't let Charles make a fuss over the boy.

What would she do if he did? Images of Levi jamming his big pistol in her husband's face danced across her mind's eye, but she tossed it aside and refused to continue thinking along those lines.

No such thing would happen. All would go fine. And just like Levi advised from the beginning of all this, she simply would not borrow trouble. She had enough guilt gnawing at her most the time.

Maybe she should've let Charley stay, though. It might make things easier. He could help the colonel drive the blacks back. She sighed. It would be deceptive not to let Charles know he had a son.

Certainly, she didn't want to start her and Levi's new life with such hanging in the closet. The man had a right to know the whole truth, and that was that. The situation wasn't any more his fault than hers.

She would face Charles with Levi at her side; and everything would work out according to the Lord's will. She'd prayed it, and she could trust the Him to see to it. She had to; He had to.

After all, hadn't God Himself been the one to send Levi to rescue her? It couldn't have been a coincidence. She rejected any outcome other than being one with the love of her life forever and ever.

Her hand went to her belly. Was that a kick? No, it had only been six weeks. Six weeks. How her life had changed.

Even if Charles hadn't remarried and didn't have other children—as she so hoped would be the case—she was pretty sure that he'd never accept her half-breed unborn.

And though Levi had, would the baby make a difference once she delivered? Rearing a dark-haired, dark-skinned little one was a whole other proposition. Why did her life have to get so messed up?

Wasn't like she'd done anything wrong. Well, except for not submitting to her husband. But hadn't she suffered enough for that small infraction? Would payment include losing Levi?

He smiled at her. He knew her so well and could always tell when things troubled her. But how could he not be, too? What must he be thinking about—confronting her husband? She smiled back then looked out the window.

New homesteads dotted the prairie. More people came out west everyday to start their new lives, and here she went, swaying to and fro, heading back east to start hers. Would she ever be able to settle

down? Have a normal life again?

Once she did, if she did, she'd give herself a gift—a month of Sundays before she planned a trip anywhere.

Rebecca slipped her hand into Rose's and squeezed. "Can you believe this buggy? Daddy traded a doctor and the blacks came as a part of the deal."

Rose turned to her friend. "It is grand. Wouldn't it be wonderful if your daddy would just take us all the way on to St. Louis?"

"I'm certain he would if Mama wasn't so far along."

"Oh, I was only fooling."

The first building came into view, a livery Rose didn't remember, and right past that, three new sawed-board houses. Clarksville must have doubled or even tripled in size during the five years she'd been gone.

A hard turn threw her into Rebecca, then the buggy stopped in front of an enormous, beautiful building. Eleven columns end-to-end supported the roof with its three chimneys and its second story balcony.

A sign over it read Donoho Hotel.

By the time the dust settled, the colonel opened her door and extended his hand. "Ladies, if you care to wait in the lobby, we'll see to things out here."

Inside the glamorous hotel, Rose turned a slow full circle taking it all in. To describe the Donoho's luxurious décor as grand didn't do it justice.

So many people filled the lobby—a few looked vaguely familiar—and many approached and greeted Rebecca, obviously loved and well respected in the community.

Again and again, she shared the good news of Sassy Fogelsong's homecoming. What a lifetime ago—being Sassy. And how quickly she'd settled into being Rose, not Rosaleen, simply Levi's Rose.

Her childhood friend introduced her to several new neighbors explaining that she had been thought dead, but in truth, stolen at age fifteen by the Comanche then rescued by her ranger brother who brought her home.

Thankful that her cape helped hide her belly, though its swelling hadn't quite yet begun, Rose pasted a smile on and did her best to hide the discomfort her past caused.

After not too long, Levi came in followed by Charley who half-carried, half-dragged her carpet bag, the one Levi had bought her at Miss Sammy Jo's lodge. The boy set it next to his partner's that waited to the side of the lobby's front door.

By the time her daddy and Wallace joined Rebecca, a small crowd gathered around Levi with boisterous greetings and many pats on his

back. He made a great hometown hero, and she smiled, grateful that the public's attention had turned.

What would they all think of him coming back home again with her—pregnant and showing by then—and her little fair-haired son?

Would they all assume she carried Levi's baby? No doubt the busy bodies scuttlebutt would fly. And if they did, they'd sure be surprised once she gave birth to an Indian's baby.

Oh, indeed, she'd planted a plenty tough row for her dear Levi to hoe. They'd probably all hate her for taking their champion and making him marry such an undeserving woman.

The colonel noted the large pile of bags then pulled out his pocket watch. "I'll see to the tickets." He nodded toward the front door. "We've got a bit of time if you ladies want to have a look around the square."

"Oh, let's, Rosaleen!" Rebecca looped her arm through Rose's. "There's a wonderful little millinery shop on the east side I'd love to show you."

"Fine by me." She turned toward her son. "Charley?"

He pushed his way through the crowd and slipped his hand into Levi's. "I'm staying with Captain Bay-lor."

She glanced at Levi and smiled.

He grinned back like a proud papa and picked the boy up. "Go ahead. We men will be right here when you get back."

Rose walked out into the fresh air and took in the bustling town square. Home. She loved Red River County. Her heart hurt that she had to leave again so soon.

She'd wanted to ride out and see her folks' place; see her middle brother who lived there and visit with his wife and the nieces and nephews she'd never even met. But all that would have to wait.

One shop after another, Rebecca showed her all around and introduced her to more folks. She'd never remember all their names.

On the boardwalk again after crossing the second dirt street, a wave of nausea swept over her. Between the growing baby and the rock of dread, room for her breakfast seemed non-existent.

She hated morning sickness.

"You okay?" Rebecca stopped in front of the grocery store. "You look a little green around the edges."

"I'll be fine, a little sick to my tummy is all." She swallowed and blew out a long breath. "Come on, let's get back to the Donoho."

Her friend glanced past her and pointed. "Oh look, there it is! The stage is here."

Levi helped Rose up the coach's step. She loved his gentlemanly manners and the way he always treated her. The coach's inside surprised her, much bigger than expected.

The three rows of seats soon filled. The last two men climbed up on the top.

“Ho, now.”

Leather slapped, chains rattled, then the coach lurched forward. Rose swallowed hard. She’d hate to throw up; good thing she grabbed a window seat just in case.

The stage swayed to the left pressing Levi’s leg against hers as the driver drove around the courthouse square then straightened out and headed east.

The team soon found a steady gait, and the swaying regulated itself a little. Miss Sue had said they’d run all the way, but Rose couldn’t see how the four horses could keep up such a pace.

All the way to Little Rock, she tried to hold her stomach steady. She’d sure be glad when the morning passed and took its dreadful nausea along with it. Maybe if she got her mind off it.

A passenger in the far seat, behind Wallace and to the side, cleared his throat. “Excuse me. Did I hear the young man there call you Captain Baylor?”

Levi gave the older man one nod. “Yes, sir.”

“So, you’re the Texas Ranger Levi Baylor?”

“Yes, sir, that would be me.”

Her son, who sat in his partner’s lap, puffed his chest. “And that’s Sarg-ant Rusk.” He thumbed toward Wallace who had taken the bench seat across from Rebecca. “I’m Charley, their littlest partner.”

Rose stifled a laugh; she loved how Levi had taken the boy in hand and turned him from a Comanche warrior to a Texas Ranger in the short span of six weeks.

The man ignored the boy keeping a stern expression. “Well, to my way of thinking, you two should have killed that Buffalo Hump and the rest of them when you had the chance.”

Wallace faced the man. “Sir, we don’t kill anybody in cold blood, but you keep talking like an idiot in front of the ladies, I might make an exception.” He turned back and winked at Rebecca then mouthed a sorry.



Levi had seen it before, but wasn’t sure how his Bitty Beck would react to Wallace putting a fool in his place. Man, what an idiot talking like that in the company of women.

For sure he could have shot Buffalo Hump, maybe even got one or two more Comanche chiefs, but then he’d be dead, too, and Texas would have a way worse war on its plate.

Personally, he was past ready for some peace and quiet across the

Republic, about as ready for this thing with Nightengale to be over, too.

Man, he hoped it didn't get messy and drag on for months or even years. Shame he didn't insist on waiting a day or two so that he could have talked with his attorney. What was the guy's name?

Didn't matter now. Uncle Henry swore by him and claimed he could work it all out one way or another if the need arose.

A part of him wished he'd taken Wallace up—before he found religion—on his offer to plug Nightengale. Good thing that small part didn't make the important decisions.

Men couldn't run around killing other men because of falling in love with their wives. Well, guess if they were Comanche, they could, but he wasn't.

No, the renowned Texas Ranger Captain Levi Baylor had a reputation to uphold, except he never stood ten feet tall. He would admit to usually getting his man though.

No one he'd ever gone after remained free. That part was true.

Rose slipped her hand into his and squeezed leaning into him. "Aren't we going too fast?"

He looked past her out the window. The mixture of hardwoods, cedars, and pines that lined the road did seem to whiz by. "Maybe, but Uncle said Little Rock by tomorrow evening."

"How's that possible? The horses will be dead before then."

"No, no. The team only goes until the first station, ten or twelve miles at most. The coach gets a new set, and we get a chance to stretch our legs. Then on to the next stop and so on. We'll keep on going through the night."

He smiled. How could he live without her in his life? "Uncle said we may have to lay over in Little Rock. It's a whole different stage line from there to Memphis. Then up river to St. Louis."

After too many bumps and sways to count and several fairly steep hills, the coach leaned hard left turning south off the main road.

A bugle sounded, then shortly, the driver whoaed the team to a stop. The door opened, and a boy maybe twice Charley's big stood back swiping at the settling dust.

"Best step lively iffin ya wants a good stretch. The old man'll have 'em changed out quick enough. Maw-maw's got corn pone and fatback iffin ya got the coin. Water's free, so long as ya don't guzzle too much."

Chapter

Thirty-One

Rose settled back into her window seat again. Levi took his place next to her, and Charley climbed into his lap. She held her hands out, but the boy shied away and cuddled into the man's chest.

"Charley." She pulled on his arm.

Levi ruffled his littlest partner's hair and slightly shook his head. "He's fine."

She shrugged and leaned against the corner gazing out the window as the station man walked the spent horses toward the barn.

She loved both her fellows, she did, but the two teaming up against her had to stop. She was Charley's mother, and he should rightfully love her the most.

But making him behave fell to her every-time. The man wanted him to be his little buddy; she couldn't ever remember him disciplining him one time.

Oh, right, sure, jealousy. Exactly what she needed to be worrying about—her son loving the most wonderful man she'd ever known more than her. If Levi didn't care for Charley sitting in his lap, why would she?

Especially not when the weight of much more important, life changing issues loomed on the near horizon; a part of her wished the stagecoach would go twice as fast. At the same time, another part wanted only to turn around and go back.

How she longed to forget all about Charles Nightengale, go on with her life as though he had died and never look back.

She stared into her lap. Hard to believe what she actually wished. If he were dead, certainly would make everything easier; no question then of her being with Levi forever.

Still, maybe she could be perfectly happy acting like Charles fell off the face of the earth, but would Levi? He'd never agree to such a charade. And truth be known, she couldn't either.

It wouldn't be fair to Charley. Even though he'd most likely never get to know his father, he ought to at least have the chance to meet him. But what if Charles tried laying claim to the boy?

There she went again, borrowing trouble. Everything was going to

work out; Levi said so, and that settled it. He would see to it, never stop until she and Charley belonged to him.

She laughed at herself. What had she told her son? That no one owned him—or her—and no one ever would. Now all she wanted in the world was to belong to Levi Baylor, lock, stock, and barrel.

That he would see to it gave her great comfort, to be loved as she'd never known possible by the man whose every little grin took her breath away. If she only had Levi, she'd have it all, and that's exactly what she wanted, the whole kit and caboodle.

Please, please, Lord.

Her hand went to her belly. She almost wished it bigger, to be further along and sure Charles would notice. What if he thought it was Levi's baby? He might.

After all, he had no idea she'd spent five years with Bold Eagle. Would that be better? Levi called her pregnancy a good thing, but did he only say it because of Charles or did he really mean it?

Oh, God. Let this all be over. Make a way, send Your favor ahead and prepare Charles's heart to grant the divorce. Don't hate me, forgive me for loving Levi.

Right! Now she asked the Almighty Who clearly hated divorce to make a way for her to have one. At least He knew her heart, and her innocence in the whole thing, too. She never meant to forget her husband, her vows, fall in love with the ranger.

Not that leaving that morning so long ago when her husband said stay would please Him. She'd sinned, not submitted, made a bad decision. No doubt. But that surely wasn't an unforgivable transgression.

And really, she'd repented. Five years as an Indian slave surely offered enough suffering and satisfied the consequences of her wrong choice. Could she even hope for God to be on her side?

On and on, the stagecoach raced through the piney woods, then after the fifth time the bugle sounded its arrival, the driver himself stood at the door in front of a two-story log structure.

"Thank you, folks, for riding the Clarksville Belle. It's been my pleasure to be your driver." He jerked his thumb toward the man standing next to him. "O'Reilly will take you on to Little Rock from here."

The new driver tipped his hat. "We be pullin' out a' nine sharp by the big clock in the grand room there." He motioned toward the building.

She loved his Irish accent.

"Got a schedule to keep now, so no lollygagging, or you'll get yourself plum left b'hind." He smiled revealing only three teeth that didn't match up at all. Poor fellow, how did he ever chew?

The next morning, Rose took Levi's hand and boarded the coach at eight-fifty, even though she and Rebecca had talked late into the night. As the beautiful tall clock chimed the hour's arrival, Wallace and Rebecca made their way out, bantering and laughing.

Rose wished she could work up a light humorous mood, but just couldn't get there. As the last chime reverberated, the stage pulled out with three fewer passengers.

Only the old idiot man remained. What a fool to think he needed to tell two such renowned Texas Rangers how they should handle their business. Why, all over the Republic people respected and honored them both.

Charley—in and out of her and Levi's lap before—took advantage of the extra room and stretched out. How the boy could sleep amazed her, but he did, deeply as though tomorrow might never come.

She wished.

Then mercifully, sometime between the ninth and tenth team change, she must have dozed off because she remembered leaning in the corner and resting her eyes in the beginning, but awoke with her head on Levi's shoulder.

One of the quilts Aunt Sue insisted on sending lay spread over her and Levi's laps, and a perfectly still Charley-sized lump bulged next to the man on the opposite side, also under the cover.

She cuddled in and pressed hard up against him. Exactly how she wanted to wake up every morning for the rest of her life. Well, a feather bed and pillow would be in order, but wherever she slept, everything would be fine as long as Levi lay beside her.

She looked up. "Hey."

"Good morning."

Giving a slight nod, she smiled. "A little nippy, thanks for the quilt."

"You're welcome. Hungry? I've got some of Uncle's jerky."

"No, not really." She sat up and stretched her spine one way then the other. "Were you able to get any sleep?"

"Thirty winks or so."

"Don't believe him. He hasn't slept since Plum Creek."

She grinned at Wallace who rested against the far corner peering at her with one eye. One day, she needed to get that man alone and hear the whole story about that battle.

In the other corner, a curl hung over Rebecca's eye. She tucked it behind her ear, looked out the window then around the coach. "Where'd the old man go?"

"The old chowderhead lit a shuck two stops ago." That Wallace, he hadn't wiped the silly grin off his face yet, not in the three days that passed since arriving at the Buckmeyers'.

A twang of sorrow washed over Rose for Laura's sake, and the baby's, too, but who could know how the situation would all shake out?

For the next few miles, the coach climbed steadily through a dense forest, mostly pines; then mercifully, the driver sounded his warning and pulled off the main road in front of a log house with a beautiful view.

Hot coffee, half of a cold biscuit, and barely a bite of salt pork didn't quite land a ringer. Best of all though, the station maintained a clean outhouse.

Before Rose was ready, the new teams stood hitched to the coach, and Levi helped her climb back in. She hated the hard seat and the constant swaying back and forth.

But God had shown her mercy. Her morning sickness abated and hadn't reared its ugly head. She hoped the meager breakfast might stay settled.

When had the nausea stopped with Charley? During those days, she remembered being so hungry. That first year with Bold Eagle blurred in a swirl of fights and beatings; somehow, her baby being born.

What a blessing he afforded, too. His birth altered everything for the better. The beatings stopped, and her life's focus changed to her caring for her son. He gave her a reason to live, and she quit trying to cook up ways to escape.

Bile rose in her throat and burned. She'd spoken to soon, except she hadn't actually said a word. And that horrid sense of dread rode the rising acidic tidal wave, whispering to her soul that nothing would ever really change.

By law, Charles Nightengale, still her husband, had all the rights. Would he ever agree to let her go? Much less consent to Charley leaving with her?

And somehow, Bold Eagle would discover she carried his baby and come steal her back.

For too many sways of the coach, she swallowed back the bile threatening to explode and listened to the black lies that flooded her heart. She shook her head.

No, she refused to throw up; swallowed hard again, and gazed out the window at the beauty of God's world. A peace settled over her queasy stomach, and her mind, quelling her fears.

Everything would surely be fine. Charles would give her a divorce without any trouble, and how could Bold Eagle ever find out? Besides, he didn't want her; he'd traded her away.

She would soon be Mis'ess Levi Bartholomew Baylor. Bartholomew, hmmm. Maybe that would be a good name for the baby

if it turned out to be a boy. She studied the love of her life.

Would he think so, or would he want the next baby, his blood, to bear his name?

Bart Baylor. She liked the sound of it. The girls would all swoon, and the men would step aside when he walked the streets. Her grin on the inside made its way to her lips.

Texas Rangers Charley Nightengale and his baby brother Bart Baylor, famous lawmen keeping the Republic safe just like their daddy and his partner.

She let the fantasy play out while the landscapes out the window flew by. Would she really want that for the boys—dangerous gallivanting all over Texas?

And what if the baby turned out to be a girl? She smiled bigger. If Charley took to her like he did the little Buckmeyer ladies, she would be the most pampered baby sister in the entire world.

Guess she'd better think of a girl's name, just in case. She faced Levi. "What was your mother's name?"

He grinned that grin she loved so much and shrugged. "Aunt Sue was the only mother I ever knew."

"Well then, how does Bartholomew sound for a boy and Susannah if it's a girl? We could call him Bart. He and Charley could be rangers like you and Wallace."

"I like Susannah for a girl. Auntie would love that."



Levi didn't comment on Charley and the baby growing up to be rangers. He couldn't imagine wishing the life on anyone. Sleepless nights, low pay, and someone all time either trying to plug you or lift your hair.

Uncle Henry hated fighting and tried to stay out of Texas' War for Independence, but once he heard what Santa Anna did at the Alamo....

A heap of good men died defending the mission, many good friends of his. He couldn't stay home after the slaughter. Then with San Jacinto won and Texas flying her own flag, he counseled Levi and Wallace against joining the rangers.

Chuckling, he shook his head. If he'd only known then....

Rose pressed her leg into his. "What's funny?"

"Oh, thinking about Uncle Henry." He sure liked her touching him. "Him trying to talk Wallace and me out of signing on with the rangers."

"I see." She bumped his leg again. "Now, what's funny about that?"

"Nothing really. Only wondering if I would do it all over again. If

I had come home after San Jacinto, things might have worked out way different.”

“I know what you’re talking about there. Believe you me, I’ve gone over my share of what-ifs in the last five years, but a wise man once told me not to go borrowing trouble.”

He grinned again. How could he wish his littlest partner away? But that’s exactly what he was thinking. Besides, even if he had come home, would he and Rose have found each other? In time?

She married Nightengale real young. Maybe fate designed all the things to turn out the way they had. The woman, though meant to be his, made a bad decision—as well as had he—that took her—and him—on different paths.

Still, in time, he had found and rescued her then fell in deep-down love with her. His heart belonged to Rosaleen. And she had fallen in love with him—head over heels she’d called it—and given her heart to him.

Levi wasn’t sure about all the fate business. What he did know? Only thing certain? Nothing and no one would keep her apart from him now. Things would work out. Whatever he had to do, however much money he had to spend, he would see to it that he would spend the rest of his life with her because it wouldn’t be worth living without her.

“Hey, partner. That guy in San Antonio, you remember? The snake oil salesman. Wasn’t his name Bart?” Wallace threw him a nod.

“Believe it was.”

“Real bad man that one. Anyone who knew him called him Black Bart.”

Rose slipped her hand to her belly, like she wanted to protect the baby. “Wallace Rusk, just because some evil man was named Bart does not mean that we can’t name this baby after Levi. Bartholomew is a strong Biblical name.”

“Is it? Well, true enough, you two can pick any name you want. Now for my money though, Uncle Wallace would be right proud to loan that child his name. Think about it. Little Wallace Rusk Baylor has a right nice ring to it.”

Rose wrinkled her nose. “I don’t think so; besides, you’ve already got Lacey named after you.”

“Oh, really? I hadn’t put that together.” Rebecca tapped Wallace’s boot with her toe. “There you go.” She smiled. “One more reason that you need to marry that dear girl. She named her baby after you.”

“Oh, I don’t know.” Wallace shrugged and stretched out his legs, crossing his feet at the ankles. “Your brother there might shoot me dead if I was to go and break your heart like that.”

Rebecca snickered and pushed his top boot off the other. “You

best watch it, Wallace. Didn't you know the Good Book says that pride goes before a fall?"

Mile after swaying, dusty mile, the playful banter flew around the coach. Maybe his partner was exactly what his Bitty Beck needed. He'd never heard her laugh so much, and for sure Wallace seemed to be genuinely intrigued with her, but he knew the man so well.

He thought on it for a while and came to the conclusion that he would advise against it if asked. But then, what did he know? Probably no one he knew would encourage him to marry Rose.

But what did that matter? Not a whit.

More likely, most would do everything they could to talk him out of it, but he didn't care what anyone thought. Marry her, he would. That's exactly what he was going to do.

For sure, he hated that she carried Bold Eagle's baby, but not any more than he hated Charley being Nightengale's son.

The innocent children. They shouldered no fault and certainly neither of their circumstances came from Rose's choices either. No more than he was to blame for being an orphan, or Aunt Sue's for having to raise him and Bitty Beck alone.

The warning bugle sounded.

Chapter

Thirty-Two

Little Rock. The Clarksville Belle had made it to the capital of Arkansas. Levi wasn't sure if he wanted statehood. He liked Texas being a Republic, but for sure, a wagon load of good reasons to join the union tipped the scales for plenty of Texians.

Worthless script, recurring Santa Anna raids, and mounting debt topped the list of statehood advocates, but no matter how he tried, he couldn't wrap giving up sovereignty around financial security.

The coach slid to a stop. A dust cloud swirled, enveloped the coach, then settled. The door flew open. "Here's the very one I been hunting, folks." The driver nodded over his shoulder at the log structure behind him. Hanging above the establishment's doors, a sign read 'Hinderiter Grog Shop'. The driver bowed his head. "It's been my pleasure; enjoy Little Rock."

While Charley and the ladies checked on connections and accommodations, Levi and Wallace helped the man unload their stuff from the boot. A right nice stack of carpet bags and hat boxes developed. Good thing he and Wallace didn't use the fourteen pounds of luggage allotted each passenger, the girls for sure made up the difference.

"The first stage to Memphis doesn't leave until tomorrow evening." Rose stood next to the pile of stuff holding Charley. How could she still be so beautiful after twenty-seven hours on the road?

Levi looked from her to Rebecca. "The Grog Shop have any rooms available?"

"No, sir." She pointed to the east. "The proprietor suggested a hotel down that way. Said it'd be right on the corner of this street and the river."

Like overburdened pack animals, he and Wallace lugged the bulky bags and boxes the two blocks to the waterfront. On the other side of the river, three steamboats rode deep in the river's murky water. Stevedores, mixed in with a long line of slaves carried bales and steamer trunks or rolled drums into a long warehouse. Reminded Levi of New Orleans. He turned around. The others had already

disappeared inside through the hotel's double front doors.

Grand chandeliers lit the lobby casting a plenty nice ambiance, but the rooms seemed a bit overpriced. After only napping in the coach, a bed would be appreciated. Maybe a good thing the stage to Memphis didn't leave until tomorrow....

He turned from the counter and handed the room keys to Wallace.

"See to things, would you, partner?"

"Of course, what are you doing?"

He smiled. "Maybe nothing. We'll see."

He returned shortly and gathered everyone into the dining room.

Seated to his right, Rose touched his forearm. "What are you grinning about?"

He hated that he had his duster on and didn't get the pleasure of actually feeling her fingers on his skin, but that would have to wait. Oh, man, he wanted all this to be over.

So why'd he'd just go and add two days to the journey? Before he could answer, the waiter appeared and took everyone's order. Once the man retreated, Levi faced her.

"I booked passage on the Eagle. We sail in the morning."

Wallace leaned back and threw him a puzzled look. "How's that? Seems to me that river runs south, and we need to head north."

"True, but at the Mississippi, the Eagle will turn north and steam into St. Louis Tuesday next, two days later than if we take the stage to Memphis."

"Oh, thank you, brother! Mother was right about stagecoaches. They're a horrible means of travel racing down the roads at breakneck speed. And that awful, never-ending sway; ugh. Bless you! A river boat!" She turned to her girlfriend. "Isn't it grand?" Then wheeled her sparkling eyes back to him. "Does it have a calliope?"

Man, he hadn't seen his Bitty Beck this excited in forever. "Don't know, she's a shallow draft, and maybe a third smaller than that one we took from New Orleans to Memphis. What? A lifetime ago?"

His sister smiled. "Well, to be exact, a little over half my life."

"What's a calliope?" Rose didn't seem nearly as thrilled.

Charley, sitting on Levi's other side, bounced his butter knife against the crystal glass. "Yes, sir, what is it?"

He reached out and took the boy's hand stopping the tinkling before the goblet broke. "A fancy organ powered by steam like the boat."

"What's an or-gan?"

"It makes music. A little like the piano at Aunt Sue's, remember that?"

"Yes, sir." The boy looked at Bitty Beck and grinned. "Miss Rebeccar played it good."

"Why, thank you, little man."

The waiter brought the first course, and everyone fell silent as the silver dome-covered dishes continued. A part of him hated the coin this trip was costing, but he'd empty his bank accounts and dig up all the hidden treasure he and Uncle Henry had planted over the years if that's what it took to make Rose his. Truth be known, he'd sell every acre of land he owned and the crops on them and all the cattle, too, if that's what it took. Life without her wouldn't be a life.

"Cap'n Bay-lor." Charley leaned in close, his voice quiet but definitely excited. "Over there." He threw his head to the side like Wallace often did.

Levi followed the boy's nod. A bearded man dressed in buckskins and sporting a coonskin cap wore a big Arkansas toothpick. Hard to miss the knife encased in a fringed leather scabbard. He looked back to Charley. "I don't know him, do you?"

"Yes, him trade with the—" He used the Comanche word for people, one of the few Levi knew. "Him bad whiskey man." He held his hand out toward his mother. "Give me the Baby. Me shoot him."

If the man sold fire water to Indians, Levi was tempted to shoot him himself, but he wasn't in Texas, and no matter what, you couldn't kill a guy on the word of a four-year-old. "Sorry, partner. We can't, he's not on a flyer."

The corners of Charley's lips turned down. "When me and Bart are rangers, we'll plug him then."

A laugh caught in Levi's throat. No way he could love this little fellow any more. Everything so black and white with him; kill bad guys on sight. If only things were so easy. The boy had a lot to learn to overcome his early teachings from the savages. "Can't just kill a man cause you think he's bad, or even know it, Little Partner. The law has to say he's guilty and can't live in polite society."

That night Charley insisted on sleeping with his mother so that he could protect her from the bad whiskey man. Levi wished he had that option, but settled for the room across the hall, the one that faced the street.

Wallace flipped a coin. "Call it."

Levi grabbed it midair and slapped it onto the back of his hand. "Heads." He revealed the copper half cent. "Heads it is." He shrugged. "Don't matter to me. Hear tell I ain't slept since Plum Creek anyhow."

"Go ahead, you won. I'll take the first watch."

He toed off his boots, draped his duster, shirt and pants over the back of a chair then flopped into bed.

"Wake up." A hand shook him.

He forced his eyes open. Wallace stood next to the bed. "You were having a bad one."

“Was I?”

“Yeah, seemed to me you was killing Laura’s Comanche again.”

Throwing his feet over the bed’s side, he rubbed his face. “He needed killing.”

“Yes, he did. It was him or Rose. Proud you got him.”

His neck cracked to one side then the other. So was he. Why did all the men he’d killed have to stalk his dreams? “I’m up now. Anything afoot?”

“Naw, a couple of drunks, mangy-looking dog and one old howling she-cat beggin’ to be a mama.”

Maybe when he and Rose were married, the nightmares would stop. But whatever. He could live with them. Hopefully, she could, too. He dressed quickly and took the chair next to the window.

Little Rock came to life like every town he’d known, shopkeepers and the cooks leading the charge into the new day. If he could find a sucker to bet with, he’d wager Uncle had beat them all up. Once he and Aunt Sue had tied the knot, he’d given up his all night hunting and fishing and taken to farming like manure pulsed through his veins.

Man, he sure hoped their baby was a boy; Auntie was getting a bit long of tooth to keep popping out young-uns. How quick could Rose have another one?

Images of Charley on his filly raced though the meadows of his mind a passel of kids hanging on behind. Before he could get a good look at his babies, a soft tap sounded on his door. He rose and crossed the room.

Rose stood in the hall, tears streaming down her cheeks.

“What?” He stepped into the hall.

Her lips quivered. “I love you.”

He wrapped her in his arms. “I love you, too, What’s wrong? Why are you crying?”

She leaned her wet cheek against his chest. “I don’t have any reason now.”

For a few wonderful beats of his heart, he held her close, then leaned his head back. “Want some coffee?”

She wiped away the tears and nodded her head. “I dreamed the Comanche killed you that first night and stole me and Laura back.”

He slipped his hand into hers and headed downstairs. What could that mean? Him and her having the same nightmare? Was his past going to haunt him for ever?

Coffee turned into breakfast, then into a blur of hauling hat boxes and carpetbags down the stairs and to the wharf, but soon enough, he had everyone on board the Eagle heading downriver. No steam organ, but soft beds and good food made it nice enough; no sway and not one

speck of dust made it right pleasurable.



Rose put one hand on the rail and waved at a boy fishing on the bank. She loved the Eagle, loved the deep rumble of the steam escaping out the tall stack, the churn and cascading water fleeing back to the river from the paddle wheel. “If the steamboat you and Levi took to Memphis as children really was grander than this, I don’t know if I could have even been comfortable aboard. Why, I’d surely have been like a long-tail cat under granny’s rocker.”

Rebecca laughed.

“This ride on the Eagle is like a slice of Heaven. That’s exactly what sailing down the Arkansas is, a right nice piece of God’s pure goodness. If only...”

“I know it’s got to be hard, Rose. I can’t imagine.”

“I keep praying. Oh, Lord, be merciful unto me a sinner. Make all things right. Fix it so that everyone involved walks away blessed. Soften Charles’ heart. Set me free.”

“Me, too. And I have faith in Him that some way, somehow, He’ll work things out.”

“But do I really have the right to ask the Almighty to end my marriage? Knowing He hates divorce? Charles hadn’t done anything wrong.”

“He should have come looking for you.”

“Oh, he’d probably just have got his hair lifted.” She pushed away from the rail, straightening her arms, and looked across the deck in both directions. “I can’t believe I actually even think that might not have been such a bad solution. Am I a monster?”

“Of course not.” Her friend took her arm. “Come on, let’s head back inside. Things are going to work out. Levi said whatever it took, and if you can count on anything, you can count on that. Shall we see if they’re done yet, or hit the gift shop?”

“The barber shop. Can you imagine the fit Charley pitched just because I wanted to go with them? He’s so stubborn and independent.”

Rebecca strolled toward the barber’s. “I bit my tongue to keep from busting a gut when he told you him and his partners were going for a haircut and shave, and they didn’t need no woman with ‘em. And you knowing Levi will have the barber lather Charley up, too.”

A smile worked its way to her lips. “I suppose that’s going to be my lot in life? Me against the menfolk.”

“Well, at least you’re used to it growing up with five brothers.”

Her hand cradled her belly. “Maybe I’ll have a baby Susannah; is

that alright with you? I mean, Levi and I talked, but... You might want to name your baby girl—”

“Heavens. No. That’d be such an honor to Mama. I’m glad you thought of it.” Rebecca stopped and turned toward her. “You’ve always been so thoughtful, and I’m so glad to have my friend back. I missed you.” She took up heading toward the barber shop again. “So tell me, what do you think of Wallace? And what about the new baby and Laura?”

Before she could respond, from halfway across the room, Charley spotted her and broke into a run. Just before he reached her, he launched himself into her outstretched arms. “Me got ears low, Mama. Do you see?”

She leaned back, nodded, then pulled him up close again. “You look great. Don’t forget to use I. I got my ears lowered.”

He leaned back and looked at her with a puzzled expression. He turned her head and patted her bun. “No, you look same.”

She laughed and hugged him tight some more. “So where’s your captain?” She almost called him daddy, wanted to, but had decided to stay with captain for the time being.

“Him and Wallace jaw with the bar-bor. Him’s the cutter man.”

“Is that right? What are they talking about?”

He bobbed his head like a woodpecker after a fat bug. “Texkus joining – um – the uh – Me no know. Something.”

“The Union?”

“Yes, ma’am! Him.”

“Thank you for using your good manners, but you called yourself me again.” Men and politics, so boring, “You getting hungry yet, sweetheart?”

“Yes. Come on Miss Rebecca. Me ‘sposed.” He grinned and his little eyes sparkled. “I ‘sposed to get her and you.” He squirmed free and grabbed her hand and Rebecca’s. “Captain Bay-lor say get a table, too, in the dining room, and him and Wallace would meet there.” He tugged on her hand. “Now come. I gotta get a table.”

“Charley, you are not the boss of me. Slow down, and we’ll all go together nicely.”

Her friend smiled at her then wiggled Charley’s hand. “See here, little man, it isn’t polite for a lady to hurry too fast.”

Soon, she and Rebecca sipped sweet tea, and Charley guzzled a sarsaparilla. A shadow danced across her soul. She twisted sideways. A man with a fancy pointed little beard dressed in a dapper corduroy suit, starched high-collared shirt, string tie, and sporting a top hat walked straight toward her. She looked away.

“Excuse me, ma’am. Are you Red Rose?”

Charley jumped up and ran toward the gent. The boy stopped

short and kicked the dandy in the shin. "You a bad whiskey man! Mama! Give me the Baby!"

Rose reached for her handbag.

The man glared at Charley and cursed. He drew back his hand. "Why, you little brat." He brought his arm down, palm spread flat toward the boy, but mid swing, a hand grabbed his forearm and spun him around.

Levi stared at him, his hackles up and his back bowed. She hated the look in his eyes.

Oh, Lord, don't let him ever look at me like that.

Wallace stood right behind him.

The man looked startled. "The kid kicked me."

Levi pulled his duster back, revealing his holstered Patterson. "You like living, mister, best move along."

"Captain Bay-lor! Him's the whiskey man! Shoot him! Shoot him dead!"

Rose jumped to her feet and scooped up her son. "Hold it, everyone. Let's all calm down." She faced the man. "The boy mistook you for someone else, sir. Please forgive us."

Charley kicked and took her face in both his hands. "No, Mama. Him bad whiskey man. You 'member?"

Levi stepped in front of her. "That right, fella? You been selling rotgut to the Comanche?"

"Yes!" The boy crossed his arms over his chest. "You dead man now. Him Captain Bay-lor. Texkus Ranger."

Rose hated the steel in Levi's voice. Would he kill the man over Charley calling him a whiskey man?

"You Levi Baylor?"

"What of it?"

"Well, that confirms this lady is Red Rose just like I thought." The guy retreated a step but squared his shoulders. "Bold Eagle said Houston broke that treaty. He wants his prize wife and blue-eyed boy back. Paying a right nice reward for their return."

Chapter

Thirty-Three

Levi waited until the man strolled out of sight then turned. Wallace threw a nod in the fellow's direction. Levi would love having his partner take care of the guy, but instead, he shook his head. "He's harmless."

"Bold Eagle ain't."

"We'll deal with him by and by." He took the boy from his mother's arms and nuzzled his neck. "You got a good eye, little partner."

He grinned. "Me want my own Baby."

"Time enough for that. Right now, we've got dinner to eat."

"When's time 'nuff? Me need my own gun." He tossed a nod at his mother. "Me tell her, give me Baby. She not."

Levi spent a big part of that day fending off Charley's when and why questions. Man, persistent should be the little guy's middle name. Finally, he fell asleep, and Levi took him to his mother who visited with Rebecca in their room. He wanted to join them, use the bad whiskey man's presence on board to spend the night with the ladies, but that wouldn't do, so he didn't even mention it.

Of course, the boy wanted a pistol of his own. Levi didn't dare tell him that he'd had his dad's musket since the age of five, but that was way back then. Aunt Sue didn't have much option but to teach him how to shoot the thing. He grinned remembering its heavy weight. He could barely pick it up, but he learned.

Maybe he'd give the long gun to Charley. An image of the boy dragging the thing around put a smile in his heart, but it couldn't crowd out the knowledge that Bold Eagle wanted Rose and the boy. Good thing she wasn't showing yet.

A part of him wanted to hunt the war chief down and shoot him like a rabid dog, but murder was still against the law, and a Texas Ranger Captain had no business killing folks, no matter what color their skin. Used to, he could send Wallace, but since the man went and found religion or faith or whatever he called it—anyway, he wouldn't do that, even if entertaining the thought obliged a certain pleasure.

No, he'd have to wait. One day though, he'd meet the Comanche chief again; knew it sure as he loved Rose. Like someone somewhere wrote it in stone that by duty, he must deal with both of his love's past husbands. And deal with them he definitely would, because he intended on being her husband for the rest of his life.

Wallace opened the door all the way then sat on the edge of the bed and jerked off a boot. "I'm hoping that idiot goes and does something stupid. He needs killing."

Levi stepped over and closed it to only a few inches, wide enough to see the ladies' door, then pulled the desk chair over to the wall where he also had a good view down the corridor toward the stairs. "You find out what room he's in?"

"Two decks down, room five."

"What name did he book passage under?"

"John Smith, but a guy in the bar called him Hawk."

Levi dug into his duster's inner pocket and pulled out the flyers. "Seems to me I remember something about a Hawk Smith."

Wallace fluffed the pillows then eased down onto the bed without bothering to pull back the covers. "Don't know. Doesn't ring any of my bells."

While his partner got busy sawing logs, Levi studied the flyers looking for any reference to a Hawk Smith. Then like a yellowed autumn leaf in the breeze, the folded note that fiddler gave him back in Henderson slipped from the stack and fluttered to the floor. He'd never read what the young man claimed was the old guy's last words.

He picked up the piece of paper. A part of him never wanted to read it; truth be known, he wanted to burn it instead. But he unfolded it then lit the oil lamp on the dresser table.

'Son of Jacob. Beware the Hawk and the Eagle. Trust in the Lord, and He will give you your heart's desires.'

An icy shiver ran through his soul, slowed his heartbeat. How could that old shaman know his father's name? Or that Hawk Smith or Bold Eagle meant him harm? He folded the omen and put it back in his inside pocket.

A floorboard creaked, then another. He put his hand on the Paterson and eased toward the bed. He touched Wallace's socked foot. His partner sat up, instantly awake. Levi motioned toward the hall then touched his ear. He resisted the urge to blow out the lamp, and instead tiptoed toward the open door with the sergeant close on his heels.

Barely audible footfalls neared. He stepped closer to the crack, but stayed in the shadows. A hand reached out toward the ladies' doorknob. Once the man's fingers touched the brass, Levi sprang. Dressed in buckskins, Hawk Smith wheeled toward him.

Levi closed the distance. He raised his pistol and slammed the Paterson's barrel into the man's coonskin hat. Hawk threw up his forearm, but couldn't block the blow. Steel against skull bone crumpled the man, who slithered to the floor.

Wallace stepped past, grabbed the no good's wrist and flipped him over. He tied the whiskey man's hands behind his back, then pulled him to his feet. "You find any reward out on this skunk?"

"No." Levi shoved him forward. "Let's take him to the ship's captain."



Rose put her fork down. "Did you get any sleep at all last night?"

"No, ma'am." Levi smiled, but void of any mirth in his tired-looking eyes.

"How about I stand watch, and you rest?"

He took a sip of coffee. "Maybe later. You remember that old man from the church meeting in Henderson?"

"Sure, if you're talking about the one who seemed to know so much about Charley. Why you asking?"

"What did you make of him?"

"Hmmm. I don't know, Levi. It seemed to me like he knew God real well." She sipped her apple cider. "I've always heard the Lord works in mysterious ways. Why?"

"Auntie said that a lot, too—about the mysterious ways. Is it in the Bible?"

"I think so." Rose could almost hear Miss Sue saying it, like that served as her answer for anything she couldn't rightly explain.

She almost wished he hadn't reminded her of the things the strange old man had said that night. Though she'd never forgotten, not completely, she'd been able to stow it way back in her mind where it didn't pester her every day.

"But why are you asking, sweetheart? What made you think of that old man?"

"Last night. Right before Smith came calling." He stopped again and stared at his coffee.

Would he ever get it out? Why was he having such a hard time?

He looked up. "I found the old man's note—or it found me. Went to looking for a flyer on Hawk, and the note fell out of the stack." He fished it out of his duster's inner pocket and held it toward her. "That next day, when the fiddler gave me the note, he claimed the guy wrote it then died. Supposedly, his last words." He shrugged and looked like a confused little boy.

God love his heart. She wanted to hold him.

"Guess I stuck it in my pocket with the flyers and forgot about it;

hadn't read it before last night."

She opened the note and read it aloud. "Son of Jacob. Beware the Hawk and the Eagle. Trust in the Lord, and He will give you your heart's desires." She studied him a moment. "Seems like good advice."

"Wallace didn't talk with the old boy, did he? I mean that you know about? You think he told him anything at all concerning me, us?"

"No, dear, not a word that I know of. I don't think he even had an opportunity. Wallace and Laura were visiting with a young couple, and I was carrying Charley back to camp when the guy came my way."

"Laura ever say anything to you about her—or Wallace—talking to him?"

"No, not a word. She never mentioned him, not to me."

Levi blew out his breath. Where could he be going with all this? She'd never seen him so unnerved.

"Well, not too many folks even know my father's name, and until this afternoon, I had no idea Bold Eagle or this Hawk guy were looking to lift my hair and steal you and Charley back."

"The eagle... You're thinking Bold Eagle." Gooseflesh rose on both arms and legs as a witness and confirmed truth to her heart.

He twisted his mouth and gave a nod. "And the whiskey man goes by Hawk, Hawk Smith. Beware the hawk and the eagle."

"Lord in Heaven. How..." She touched his hand. "Well, he can't have your hair or Charley's, and for sure, he can't have me. If Bold Eagle knows what's good for him, he'll forget about all of us."

The corners of his mouth turned up the slightest fraction; it seemed he wanted to say something else, but couldn't get it out. Instead, he stared into her eyes, so she searched his. It hurt her heart for him to be so troubled, but she didn't know what to say. The sound of little boots caught his attention away from her. Charley raced toward his Cap-tain Baylor, then stopped short when the man held out his hand.

"Easy, partner. Remember, no running."

The boy ducked his head and slow-walked the last few steps. "Yes, sir. Me go slow." He climbed into the chair next to the man. It nicked her heart, but he was only doing the same as her, trying to get as close to Levi as possible.

Oh, Lord, You know how much I love him. Please open the door, make a way for us to be together forever, please. A thought wiggled into her heart. It almost choked her, but she closed her eyes and considered it. Could she? Had to. But Father, Your will, not mine be done.

For a few beats of her heart, a black cloud hovered over her soul,

then a warmth spread from her innermost being through the whole of her, and she knew. With everything in her, she knew it would all work out. A peace settled over her like one of Granny's heavy quilts. She studied her son and the man she loved and smiled.



Levi tucked the napkin into the boy's shirt, then looked to Rose. "What are you grinning about?"

She slipped her hand into his and squeezed. "Us, it's all going to be good."

He nodded, but how many men would walk with the ghosts that stalked his dreams to make that happen? He'd given his word to her, and either it would all work out, or he'd die in the doing. A life without her and Charley would be like Uncle Henry never marrying Aunt Sue.

At her and his sister's insistence, he tried a nap, but his mind wouldn't be quiet long enough. He did manage to doze some that night, but couldn't stay in bed. With each wink or nod, an owl's hoot or coyote's yelp woke him.

The following nights only got worse. All the dead dream walkers appeared one at a time as usual. They all joined up with Bold Eagle and the Hawk, and no matter how many times he killed them again, they kept coming from every direction.

The last night before St Louis, he let Rose talk him into a hot toddy. Didn't figure it'd work, but her concern over the bags under his eyes convinced him to take his medicine—for her sake—like the good boy she wanted him to be.

As the other nights before, the horde of dead men encircled him and his little family. For the longest, he battled his ghosts, then a winged man flew right toward him. He circled over the horde once, then landed right next to Levi and folded his wings. The being faced the attackers. "Be gone."

His words, like cannon shot, propelled the dead men backwards until they disappeared all together. The being faced Levi. His face looked like the man who had written the note, only younger. He smiled. "Levi Bartholomew Baylor, put your trust in the Lord. Do not lean to your own understanding, and he will give you all the desires of your heart."

"But how? How can I? I've killed so many men." He searched the icy blue eyes of the winged man. "I don't even know the number. God wouldn't, He couldn't forgive me. No more than I was willing to forgive Him for taking my Pa."

"Son, with God, all things are possible." The guy touched Levi's forehead then floated skyward without the use of his feathered wings.

He watched until he disappeared, then somehow fell into a bed of soft furs covered by his aunt's quilts. Both Wallace and Uncle Henry stood guard. Real quick, he drifted off into a dreamless slumber.

A bump jarred him awake. The boat docking? A ray of sunlight sliced its way through the window's shutters. He swung his legs over the bed's side. Where was Wallace?

He rolled over, slipped to his knees, and bowed his head. "Lord, save me; I can't do it anymore without You."

Instantly, a wonderful love poured through him. It changed his heart, made it new. Joy seemed to bubble up all the way from his toes. Forgiven, he was forgiven! None of it—nothing he'd ever done—would ever be held against him.

Praise God. Tears flowed. He lifted both hands to Heaven. "Thank You, Father. Bless You."

Why, oh, why had he resisted so long?

Chapter

Thirty-Four

The leather strap around Rose's big toe tugged. No, it couldn't be. How did she get to Bold Eagle's camp? She yanked back. Refused to go. She'd kill him first. He pulled harder.

She sat up and opened her eyes. Rebecca stood at the end of the bed, her hand on Rose's foot, shaking her big toe.

"Wake up."

She fought her way through the sleep fog. Thank God! She wasn't in the wives' teepee, but where? She glanced around. The day's light tickled the little window. Her chest tightened. Onboard a steamboat. It all came back. St. Louis. Heading there to beg her husband for a divorce.

Oh, Lord.

She swallowed hard, then forced her mouth to smile. "What is it?"

"You were having a bad dream."

She scooted up in the bed and hugged her knees to her chest. "I was back with the Comanche."

Rebecca sat beside her. "Want to talk about it?"

At first, the words came hard, then the more she talked, the easier telling her friend got. Her life with the people flowed out of her. From her being stolen to being traded, beaten, pregnant, raped.

Once the telling was done, Rebecca took to asking questions. She had never told anyone the whole story, not even Levi, but getting it all out was good.

Somehow, it didn't haunt her so bad now; almost as though it all happened to someone else. The band squeezing her chest loosened some, but not completely. It would not release her until she faced Charles.

The steam whistle blew a long blast, and the boat slowed considerably.

"We must be getting close." Rebecca grabbed her clutch and bonnet. "Get the baby up, and the two of you dressed. I'll go see how much time we have."

As long as she could remember, she'd always let her friend boss her around. Why stop now? "Yes, ma'am."

Rebecca smirked at her sarcasm, smiled, then disappeared out the door. Halfway through dressing Charley, her friend popped back in. "We're pulling into St. Louis, but we're having breakfast on board. You need any help?"

"No, we're almost ready. We'll be right down."

"Alright, see you in the dining room. Don't worry with packing. After we eat, we'll run back up and get everything together."

Rose noticed the change in Levi first thing. What was it?

She held her tongue and didn't comment on it, hoping he would volunteer, but he was being his normally tightlipped, manly self. What was it with men anyway? Well, her mama always said if you wanted to know a thing, speak up.

"You sure look good this morning, Levi. Even better than usual."

"Thank you, ma'am." He grinned. "Slept like a baby."

"I not baby."

Rose leaned out past the man and smiled at her son. "He wasn't calling you a baby."

"Miss Rebecca did. This morning." He looked across the table and made his mad face. So, the little man had been awake. Oh dear, how much of her story had he heard?

Wallace waved him off. "Slip of the tongue, partner. Everyone knows you are not a baby." He pointed his fork at him. "You spotted the bad whiskey man. Knew him right off. No, you're a big boy, and that's a fact. And listen here, your auntie can call me baby anytime she wants."

A broad smile broke across Charley's face. "You like her. You going to marry her, Sarge?"

Rebecca choked on her scrambled egg and reached for her water.

Wallace patted her on the back.

The boy's declaration brought an uneasy silence. Levi covered Rose's hand then scooted his chair back and stood. "We best get to packing."



The morning flew by for Levi. How could everything change so much? He was still the same person, but so different. Inside.

A peace filled his heart; one that he would have bet all his gold and land just yesterday wasn't possible. How could someone like him—who had shed so much blood—be redeemed?

But that's exactly what happened that very morning.

He'd been born again. During the course of his life, he'd heard about it so many times from so many different people, but always thought it sounded ridiculous. One thing for sure, it was definitely

real. He had experienced it.

He couldn't tell anyone how, but he was a new man. All those scriptures Aunt Sue forced him to read so long ago now made perfect sense.

The impossible, the unbelievable, in one fell swoop became possible and so easy to understand and believe. For the first time in his life, peace filled his soul.

He almost blurted it out when Rose asked him at breakfast, but decided to wait until he could get her alone. He loved his Bitty Beck and Wallace. They'd both be thrilled, and so would Aunt Sue and Uncle Henry, too, when they heard.

But Rose was the love of his life, and he wanted to share his good news with her first.

All morning, he moved his little troupe from the steamer to the hotel on Broadway Street a couple of blocks from the wharf. The right moment never presented itself. Once he finally got everyone settled, dinner pulled the whole group together again.

Soon as Wallace had his boots under the fancy table in the hotel's grand dining hall, he threw Levi a nod. "The clerk knows Nightengale, says he lives in the north part of town. I got directions."

Levi glanced at Rose. The dread in her eyes matched what hovered over his heart, but he'd not have it. No fear. No doubt. No worry. The man had to be rational. She didn't love him, probably never did. She'd been what? Fifteen when he stole her heart away and married her? "He say how far?"

"Better than four miles, he said about a mile past the sawmill."

"You ask about a livery?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good man. Did he happen to mention where the closest church might be?"

Wallace snorted then smiled. "No, should I have asked?"

"Well." Levi slipped his hand into Rose's and smiled at her then his sister and partner. "Figured I best get baptized before we went and saw Nightengale."

Rose squeezed his hand. "Oh, Levi, that's wonderful."

For the first time he could remember, his Bitty Beck sat speechless.

Wallace shook his head grinning like a kid in a candy store. "Yes, siree. I'll find us a preacher man, we both can get dunked. Make it a two for one deal."

Rebecca sucked in a breath. "When?" Her dazzling smile covered her face. "Mama is going to be so pleased, and Daddy, too. Oh, Levi, we've been praying for you for so long."

"I know, and I thank you, Sister. Shame I was so stubborn."

Took Wallace the better part of the afternoon to find a minister who had a full baptistery, but after he and Levi answered all the man's questions about their respective conversions, Levi made it worth the man's trouble.

Sure felt great, washing all his old life away. And he loved it, made the experience even better that his partner got dunked at the same time.

After he and Wallace got dried off and changed, he took Rose's hand and headed out of the church. He smiled at her. "You ready?"

Her mouth said yes, but her eyes said no, pleaded with him to run the other direction.

"It's going to be fine; he'll be reasonable."



Rose didn't want to face Charles, but she had to. The part of her that wanted to run away grew stronger with each turn of the rented buggy's wheels. Wallace rolled past a big and bustling sawmill with logs everywhere. Steam belched from two different sheds, and mules pulled wagons loaded with sawed boards. The sign on the side of the building declared Nightengale Lumber.

It surprised her that Charles owned such a big operation, though she wasn't sure what she expected. Could he have done all this in five years? Why had he ever come to Texas, anyway?

She looked down at her boy. The sign could say Nightengale and Son. If the Comanche hadn't stolen her that morning at the Kickapoo, if she'd stayed home like Charles told her....

She glanced up at the man beside her, the strong, wonderful, generous, famous Texas Ranger who loved her—whom she loved. No, she had no regrets, not even the awful years spent with Bold Eagle, because every step along the way—no matter how bad or how hard—only led her to Levi.

How could she ever lament any of it? Her hand went to her slightly bulging belly, and the peace of God washed over her.

No, Lord, I thank You for the paths I've traveled that led me to this man.

Rebecca reached across and touched her knee, pulling Rose back to the day and the trip across town and its purpose. "Want me to keep Charley in the buggy with me?"

Wallace made a left and caused her to lean into Levi. He looked down and offered his reassuring smile. Rose focused. She glanced to her baby then back to her good friend. "No, but thank you. He needs to at least meet Charles; he may never get another chance."

"Me go back Texkus, no like stinking Louie. Me ride Shooter."

Rose reached across Levi and patted the boy's leg. "We'll be home soon enough, but right now, we need to get things straight with your –" She stopped herself. Charles had fathered the boy alright, but he wasn't his daddy. Levi had been more a father to Charley than anyone. "Anyway, we need to talk with Charles Nightengale and get things settled."

His face brightened. "Hey, that's me." He folded his arms over his chest. "Me settle things. We go home."

The buggy stopped in front of a two-story sawed board house. A whitewashed picket fence guarded the front yard, and fancy little doodaddies and scrolly swirls adorned every corner, every eave. Quite fancy indeed.

Two little girls dressed in frilly dresses played with dolls on the wide wrap-around porch. Had Wallace got the directions wrong? Could Charles have such an extravagant house? And be the father of the two girls?

Bile crept into her throat. Oh no, she couldn't be sick. Not now. She swallowed.

The door opened, and Levi climbed out. He offered his hand to her. Charley jumped out and stood beside him. Oh, how she loved those two. Rose sniffed then filled her lungs. She accepted Levi's hand, and his strength passed into her. She stepped out.

Her heart pounded in her chest. She squeezed Levi's hand then smoothed her skirt.

She looked to Wallace. "You sure this is the right place?" Her words came soft, barely a whisper.

"Yes, ma'am."

The little girls stared. Levi opened the picket fence gate. The older one stood and grabbed the other's hand. "Mama! We've got company."

Rose froze in place, as though she couldn't pass through the opening. Levi tugged her hand ever so gently. "It'll be fine."

Had Charles married a widow with a ready made family? She willed her feet to move. No, she could see him in the little ladies. The oldest, maybe ten, eyed them hard. The younger dropped her sister's hand and ran inside, letting the screen door slam behind her. She had to be seven or eight.

Wait. She stopped again on the front walk. How could this be? Were they nieces? They couldn't be his.

The oldest girl turned toward the house. "Mama! Daddy! Better get on out here."

Rose forced one foot in front of the other. Just as she reached the first step, the front door opened. Charles Nightengale himself stood there. For a heartbeat, he stared, then his mouth dropped open.

"Sassy? How can it be?" He broke into a smile. "It is you." Then as

quickly, any pleasure he'd displayed disappeared, and his lips straightened. "What are you doing here?" He glanced over his shoulder at the girl. "Get inside, Ella."

"But, Father –"

His tone turned harsh. "Now, Ella Mae." She hung her head, but vanished into the extravagant home. Charles stepped on out then closed the door. "What happened, Sassy? Where have you been?"

"The Comanche..."

The front door opened again, and an older woman appeared. "Charles, dear, where are your manners? Invite these folks inside. You don't want to conduct business out here on the porch." She smiled at Charley. "Wouldn't you like a glass of lemonade, young man?"

Charles spun around and faced her. "We're fine, dear. These folks are only lost. They'll not be staying."

That tone. Bad memories came flooding in. Rose hated that tone. He ordered this lady around in the same way he used to boss her.

Five years with the Comanche had dimmed and softened that tone in her memory. Now it all came back clear and hot as the noonday sun. A dangerous fire burned in her belly. She looked past her husband and nodded at the woman.

She steeled herself and forced her voice to sound as calm as possible. "Good afternoon, ma'am. You the new Mis'ess Charles Nightengale?"

The lady laughed a rather nervous chuckle. "New? Hard to feel new, having birthed him four daughters in twelve years of marriage."

The lady's words hit Rose square in the gut. Mind spinning, she studied the woman. What reason would she have to lie? Twelve years? The wildfire inside heated and spread.

She looked to Charles. He looked away, couldn't meet her gaze. His eyes fixed over her head with guilt written across his lying face.

"You were married? You were already married? Why you no good –" She balled her fist and stepped toward him.

Levi wrapped his arms around her. "Rose, wait. Think about it."

She faced him. "Think about it? You tell me what there is to think about?" She whirled back and glared at the bigamist. "This no good chowderhead already had a wife! And children! When he married me!" She whirled on Nightengale again. "You're a bad, horrible excuse for a human being!"

"What?" The lady grabbed her husband's arm and spun him toward her. "What in the world is this girl talking about?"

"How do I know? I've never seen these people."

Her son stepped forward past Rose pointing the Baby at his father. "You're a bad man. Got a flyer on him, partner?"

"Charley, no! Put down that pistol right now! Give it to me!"

Mis'ess Nightengale squealed and herded her daughters to a corner of the porch. Charles glared at the boy. Levi stepped forward and lifted the gun from his littlest partner's hand. "Not this one, Son."

With his hands on his hips, he climbed the porch steps straight to his father and looked up. "You a bad man. Mama said." He kicked him square in the shin, turned and marched down the steps taking a place by Rebecca with his arms crossed over his chest.

With her son out of harm's way, Rose whirled back on Nightengale wagging her finger. "Charley's right. You are bad to the core, horrible! How could you? You... You..."

"Rose, listen to me." Levi moved behind her and gently took her elbows, pulled her back a few steps, then turned her. He took her face in both hands. "Shhh, hear me." He kissed her forehead and spoke ever so softly. "You are not married. Never were."

She searched the depth of his eyes. Charles' lies, his tone, his wife's questions, and the little girls' crying faded away.

Only Levi's face remained.

His words echoed in her heart.

Not married, never were, not married.

She allowed the truth to sink in. She wasn't married!

She threw her arms around his neck. "Levi! I'm not married. I'm free to be yours!"

He grinned. "I know. God did it! He answered our prayers in the best way! Will you marry me, Rosaleen Fogelsong?"

She burst into tears. "Yes! Yes! Yes!"

Chapter

Thirty-Five

She wasn't married, had never been. God had not only set her free, but made her brand new. Rose let Levi guide her back to the buggy. Joyful tears flowed. She would have cold-cocked that man if Levi hadn't stopped her.

More sweet tears cooled her cheeks. She wasn't married. Nothing—no thing—stood in her and Levi's way. God had made a way. She could be with her ranger forever. Together.

He helped her inside the coach.

Like a wheel inside a wheel, things spun and turned in a wonderful blurry haze. Levi, Wallace, and Rebecca handled everything. She wanted to take her shopping for a dress, but Rose flatly refused.

She wanted to go straight to the church. Never would she have thought that morning when she put on her Kelly green skirt and blouse that it would be her wedding attire.

How quickly a life could change.

Her friend told the same minister who'd baptized the men earlier that morning the whole story, but he still questioned Rose. Yes, she loved this wonderful man, and no, not a reason in the world existed why she shouldn't be married to him.

God brought her together with Levi Bartholomew Baylor, and the Lord Himself had made a way when she'd thought there was none.

"I do." She wanted to shout the words, but kept her voice soft and strong. She loved him so much. Thank You, Father. Bless You.

The next morning, a rapid knock sounded on the door. She rose on one elbow and kissed Levi's cheek. "Husband?"

He opened one eye and smiled.

"Someone is knocking at our door." She grinned back. "Did you hear me? Our door? Don't you just love the sound of that? Not your door. Not my door. Our door. I love being Mis'ess Levi Baylor."

Another knock sounded more like someone banging it with their fist than rapping with their knuckles. "Mama! Daddy Cap-tain! Let me in!"

Levi slipped out, opened the door, then followed his little partner

back to the bed. Charley snuggled under the covers next to her right in the middle and spread his infectious smile around.

Then he proudly announced, “Me escaped.”

Her brand new husband tousled her son’s hair. “How’d you do that?”

Charley scooted up and launched into an elaborate explanation. She loved this boy and his story. Shame she’d named him after that lying—she stopped herself.

She wouldn’t do that; not today, not ever. Charles Nightengale fathered the boy, but Levi Baylor would always be his daddy and partner. And that was that.

Wishing away the past served no purpose. Her hand went to her expanding waist. Soon enough, she’d deliver the newest member of her little family, then she and Levi could be about having him a passel of babies.

“Then me put chair back and run here.”

Another knock rapped at the door; this one sounded soft and ladylike followed by a rather loud whisper. “Rose? You awake?”

The boy ducked under the covers. “It’s Auntie Bitty Beck! Hide me.”

Levi hid him best he could, but Rebecca got him anyway and tickled him good as punishment for escaping. Rose would love nothing better than to lounge around in bed all day.

But Levi had booked them passage on a steamboat to Memphis. Rebecca had asked if she could check on her grandfather on the way home. It didn’t matter to Rose.

The Lord had worked things out for her and Levi, given her the desires of her heart. She’d never been married until yesterday, and she now treasured the institution.

Four lazy wonderful days steaming downriver, cherishing being Mis’ess Levi Baylor, then it all changed the moment the hired buggy stopped in front of her friend’s grandfather’s home.

She didn’t recognize the light-skinned darkie on the grand house’s front porch, but apparently Rebecca did.

She flung the buggy’s door open and jumped down. “Jean Paul, what are you doing here?”

“It’s your mama, Miss Rebecca. The baby boy came early, and Miss Sue’s in a bad way. Your daddy sent me.”



Levi heard the ex-slave’s words, but didn’t want to believe them. The only mother he’d ever known couldn’t be in a bad way. She’d never been sick a day in her life.

There had to be some mistake. Other women—his own mother—

had trouble birthing babies and died, but not Susanna Abbot Baylor Buckmeyer. She'd been the one constant in his life.

Why he always figured she'd be there crying her eyes out when they planted him.

Oh, Lord, don't let anything happen to Auntie.

He shook off the news and turned his attention to getting home as quickly as possible. Had it been only him, he'd buy the best horse he could find and get gone, but it wasn't. He had to get his sister back, too.

"Wallace."

"Yes, sir."

He handed his friend two gold eagles. "Make the arrangements, get us all home."

"Yes, sir."

In a little more than an hour by the old man's parlor clock, Rebecca hugged her grandfather's neck and promised to send word.

His troupe crossed over the Mississippi on a barge, then Wallace had seats booked on the stage that left from the wharf. Levi hated the hard benches, hated the swaying, but nothing else made sense.

Hour after hour, he fought the urge to borrow trouble, refused to speculate. She had to pull through. She'd prayed so long for him, and he wanted to share his good news with her.

Letting her know her prayers had been answered would thrill her. She'd be so happy. About his and Rose's good news, too. She and his Bitty Beck would throw the biggest party Red River County ever saw for his new bride and him.

He imagined the hustle and bustle and all her smiles, the laughing. Why hadn't he ever told her how much he loved her and appreciated her, everything she ever did for him?

Once he got home, she'd know for sure what she meant to him. How proud he was of her for sticking to her guns and not breaking her vow. He had no idea back then how hard it had been for her.

Sue Baylor was the strongest woman he'd ever known. He looked over at his wife. She was an awful lot like Aunt Sue, strong and independent.

He'd seen for himself back when just a kid that she fell in love with Henry; how much they loved each other, but she never would have tied the knot without her father's blessing.

A short laugh tried to escape. Actually, truth be known, she was probably stubborn and proud to a fault. A pat on his knee ended his cogitations. He nodded at Rebecca.

She sat across from him. "When Rose married Nightengale, I couldn't believe it, was so disappointed. We were so young, and...." Her voice trailed off and her gaze fell to her lap where she worried

with a cuticle.

“And? What did she do?”

Almost a little embarrassed, she looked up and shrugged slightly. “Oh, I’d always wanted her for my sister, so, well, I guess I’d been asking God for the two of you to fall in love.”

“That so.”

She grinned real big. “And now you have. Mama’s going to be so happy!”

Levi glanced at his beautiful bride who snoozed on his shoulder, then back to his Bitty Beck. “Well, the Lord definitely does work in mysterious ways.”

She sniffed then moved her head slightly.

“Right before we left for St. Louis, she took me aside.” She swiped at her cheeks. “I was so glad to be going, so excited that my prayers were coming true. I didn’t really listen to her...”

“Auntie?”

She nodded.

“What did she say?”

“I can’t even remember all of it, but that she loved me. And how the last twelve years with Daddy were the best of her life. She hugged me real hard and long.” She stared out the window a long minute.

“I never doubted her love.”

“Do you think she knew? I mean that she might have trouble?”

“Couldn’t have, could she?”

Looking back, Rebecca waved air in her face. “I thought she was being silly or something—a little too sentimental—because of me being gone a month. But now, the more I think about it, maybe she sensed something and...”

He shook his head, then reached out and patted her knee. “Oh, Sister, don’t. Auntie’s fine. She’ll be all well by the time we get home.”

She nodded again, but he wasn’t sure he’d swayed her, or himself. For a bit, sweet images of his aunt danced around and through the prairies of his mind. One of his favorites stopped and lightened his heart.

“Remember our third cotton crop, the first big one?”

“How could I ever forget? That’s the year we met Daddy.”

“I got so sick of chopping; my calluses had blisters. Then late one afternoon, I spotted her standing at the end of a row in those britches of Uncle Andy’s she always wore stomping the dirt to beat the nines. I watched her for a minute or two before she saw me.”

He choked back a tear.

“And? What did she do?”

He swallowed hard and hurried back to his telling. “Smiled ear to ear and held her arms out opened wide to me. I trotted up that row

into the biggest hug she'd ever given me."

"I love her hugs!"

"Even though I was bigger, she twirled me around then whispered in my ear. 'We did it, Levi.'" He smiled at his Bitty Beck. "Don't you worry. She'll beat this, whatever it is, just like she whipped that cotton."

"Mama's one tough lady, that's for certain. I'll never forget the time she got the wagon stuck in White Oak Creek. Remember?"

"How could I forget?"

"Daddy carried her to shore. I loved it, watching him carry her. I wanted them to fall in love and get married more than anything in the world."

"You're quite the little matchmaker, aren't you? Even way back then."

She raised both eyebrows and gave him one little nod down. "Yes, sir, that's me."

Even with all the pleasant memories, the closer to Texas he got, the darker the cloud that followed, hovering over his heart. He hated the thought of her suffering and prayed her fever would break.

She always told everyone that she never got sick, even being blue at the gills and burning up with fever, she'd scurry around seeing to dinner.

What if he never saw her again? If she never tousled his hair or kissed his cheek again? He'd be happy even to have her boss him around some.

He tried to think before, but couldn't remember any times when she wasn't his only parent, back before the accident. He'd been five. As many times as he'd tried, he never could see his father's face.

Though nightmares of that awful night his dad and uncle died plagued him with horrible images burned into his memory of the dead oxen and jumbled logs, Auntie had protected him.

She kept him from seeing his father's mangled body under the unnatural stack of timbers. He still remembered the seriousness of her tone when she told him to stay in the wagon.

As each long mile stacked on top of the last swaying, bumpy mile, the dread grew. He couldn't shake it, but refused to give it voice. It hung heavy in the coach.

Wallace took to riding up top with the driver; even his partner couldn't muster his normally cheery banter in the midst of such gloom.

Awake again, Rose snuggled into his arm and held him tight, but she also had caught the morose mood and had very little to say. Charley sensed it, too; bless his little heart.

For the long ride and the brief stops along the way, he acted on

his best behavior. Man, he loved his littlest partner. He'd hate it if Auntie didn't get a chance to know the boy better.

A boy. She and Uncle Henry had waited so long for a son. He and Rebecca had pumped every bit of information Jean Paul could possibly give early in the trip, but he suddenly thought of an unasked question.

"Jean Paul, what did Auntie and Uncle name the baby?"

The creamy-coffee colored man shook his head and lifted his shoulders. "Don't know. Not sure they had when I left, course the babe wasn't even a full day old before Mister Henry sent me."

Finally, the coach pulled into Clarksville. Getting the boxes and bags transferred to the buggy Jean Paul had come to town in gave Levi a respite, but the task led him to driving it out of town.

Too soon, the cloud returned. He put the team on a three mile-an-hour lope, with plans on the blacks galloping the last two miles in half that time.

He'd first learned about pacing on that trip to Jefferson when Auntie and Uncle fell in love. For a few miles, he relived those days.

He'd been so resentful of her hiring Henry to help, like he couldn't handle things, but he and his Bitty Beck and Aunt Sue, too, would have been dead several times over if not for Henry Buckmeyer.

Were they all on borrowed time? Had these last twelve years been a gift from the Lord? He hated the thought of anything happening to Auntie.

He slapped the reins over the horses' backs, desperate to see her smiling face and hear that she was all better. He wasn't one to borrow trouble. So why all the fears and fretting? He was being silly.

"Ho, now. Get to it, boys."

He slowed them enough to make the turn off the road onto his and Auntie's land, then once across the smokehouse creek, urged them back into a run through the farm field.

The team flew past the pool he and Uncle had spent that whole summer digging with eight mules and two scoops. Man, he'd never worked so hard in his life.

He rounded the corner and urged the horses up the hill to the big house. Midst a cloud of dust, he brought the buggy to a stop. He jumped down and ran toward the house.

Laura sat in Auntie's rocker on the front porch with two baby-sized bundles at her breasts. Halfway there, the girl pointed north. "Up there on the next rise."

He took off running. Down the home hill then he jumped the creek and started back up. Nearing the top, he stopped.

For a breath, he didn't see anything, then in the shadows of a huge oak fifty paces north, a scene he never wanted to witness burned

into his forever memory.

Uncle Henry knelt by a newly dug grave.

Levi's heart sank.

"Mama!" Rebecca's scream broke his heart. She ran past him and didn't stop until she reached her daddy. She fell down onto him, hugging his neck and sobbing. "No! No! She can't be gone!"

Levi joined them. Tears streamed down his cheeks.

Henry looked up, his eyes swollen and red. "She loved you two so much. She fought hard to hang on, but God love her, she got so weak." He wiped away his tears.

"It isn't right." Levi shook his head. "I had such good news for her. How her prayers were answered. The Lord.... He saved my soul."

His uncle stared at him for a few heartbeats smiling. "Must have been what she was talking about."

"What? What did she say?"

Henry sniffed and wiped his nose. "Right before she passed on. She'd been out of it, talking to her mama like she was a little girl again. Then all of a sudden, she sat up straight in bed, all fine.

"Clear as ever, she said, 'Oh, Levi, that's so wonderful.' Those were her last words. She laid back down and closed her eyes. Died with the sweetest smile on her face. Oh, how I love her smiles." Henry nodded. "I think she knew."

The news comforted Levi some, but his mother was still gone. He knelt beside his uncle then placed his forehead on the fresh dug dirt. Tears flowed for the longest, then Henry stood and pulled him to his feet.

The man Levi counted as his father held both his shoulders firm, gave him a determined look. "Son, the Lord giveth, and the Lord taketh away. Blessed be the name of the Lord."

THE END

(for now...)

Other Titles by Caryl McAdoo

Vow Unbroken a historical Christian (western adventure) romance from Howard Books, a division of Simon & Schuster; Book 1, a Texas Romance (*In HEARTS STOLEN - Book 2 -Levi of VOW UNBROKEN is introduced.*)
ISBN 978-1-4767-3551-1 / ebook 1-4767-3551-4

Susannah Baylor reluctantly hires Henry Buckmeyer in 1832 to help her along the Jefferson Trace, the hard stretch of land between her Texas farm and the cotton market, where she's determined to get a fair price for her crop. It's been a long, rough ten years and the widow's in danger of losing the land her husband and his brother left to her and the children, but she needs help to get both her wagons safely to Jefferson.

She knows Henry's reputation as a lay-about and is prepared for his insolence, but she never expects his good looks or irresistible, gentle manner. Soon they are entwined in a romantic relationship that only gets more complicated because Henry doesn't know God the way she does. Dangers arise on the trace--but none as difficult as the trial her heart is going through. Will Susannah and Henry's love overcome their differences?

And will she get her crop to market and sell it for enough to save her farm? In this heartening and adventurous tale, a young woman's fortitude, faith, and heart are put to the ultimate test.

(See 5-Star Review snippets in the front pages of *Hearts Stolen*)

Lady Luck's a Loser

a contemporary mature
inspirational romance; Book 1, an Apple Orchard Romance
ISBN 978-0-6159-9574-8 / ebook 0-6159-9574-8

Marge Winters answers the ad for manager at a Bed & Breakfast placed by a wealthy widower seeking a new wife. W. G. Preston, trying to avoid the dating game, hires eight diverse women to come live at the B&B and be themselves while he gets to know them.

He soon realizes he can't take six months with all eight and devises a plan to eliminate one per month, leaving the decision to Lady Luck as he successfully has many times in his life.

The women compete to win his wedding ring. The widow grandmother Marge is witty and friendly, yet naive. Youngest, Vicki hides her enchanting vulnerability with a queenly persona. Audrey, a great listener and cook, can be quite moody. The cute Natalie has trouble making friends.

The beautiful Virginia harbors a secret, and energetic Holly lifts everyone's spirits, but ruined her wholesome image with breast implants paid for with Preston's signing bonus. Charlotte loves antiques, as did the first Miss Preston, and Dorothy is quite a leader, but Preston isn't looking for a manager. He wants a wife.

Who will win his proposal?

Lady Luck's a Loser is an amusing character study that hooks readers through the depth provided to the cast, which enables the novel to avoid the pitfalls of *How to Marry a Millionaire* and *The Bachelor*. A difficult accomplishment, each of the key players can be distinguished from one another.

And coming in soon...

Hope Reborn

historical Christian 'western adventure'
romance; Book 3, a Texas Romance

In 1850 Northeast Texas, a man's hope is reborn proving God always has a plan if only His children will trust in Him. The widower never expects to love again, trudging through the daily motions of living and doing his best to minimize his children's loss. Would he hurt so until he joined her?

New York novelist May Meriwether decides a heroic Texas Ranger will make a great love interest for her new dime novel's heroine. Loving adventure—keeps her mind off her solitude—she sets out to

the Lone Star State with her constant companion and confidant Chester in tow to find and interview the famed Texas Ranger Levi Baylor.

Having pushed dreams for a husband and children to the recesses of her heart, the self-professed old maid deems them dead, but meets a near-perfect widower and starts thinking there may yet be a chance for fulfilled dreams. Only his impenetrable, superstitious religious beliefs stand in the path to her falling head over heels, those and the love for his dead wife that still fills his heart. Would there ever be room for May there? And would he give up his crazy fanaticism over God?

The unexpected romance surprises both, and hope is reborn in God's unfailing grace. A life built on lies finds the Way to confession, forgiveness, and true joy. In a day when the church offers the only stability on the Texas prairie, these unlikely players find one, but can the love they've found survive?

A Little Lower than the Angels ^A

biblical fiction and Book 1 of The Generations from God series.

Running three parallel storylines, *A Little Lower than the Angels* opens with the sacrifices offered to God by Adam and his two sons Cain and Abel. Everyone knows the story, but this novel brings it to life from a new perspective.

One story follows Cain after Abel's murder. He flees Adam's Valley with his sister Sheria traveling to the land of Nod, east of Eden. Marked and cursed as a vagabond, he becomes easy prey for Satan and his minions, ever moving further and further from the teachings of his father and obedience to God. (Scripture says he went to Nod with his wife, and that Eve is the mother of all the living, so she must be the mother of the woman Cain takes as his wife, making her his sister as well.)

Another tells of Abel's adventures in Paradise. He enters in at the death of his earthy flesh. Father God sends the first of the cherubim, a wonderful character named Namrel, to greet him and teach him, help him adjust to his new home. Abel meets the pets of his parents when they still lived in the Garden of Eden, Lion and Lamb, and Centurion, a captain of the host. He learns how earthly prayers lose the angels to war on earth's inhabitants' behalf—and how they war.

Lastly, we remains in Adam's Valley and mourn with the bereaved parents facing the loss of their three children. He and Eve relive different times in their lives as God helps them to endure and brings them to repentance.

Reach out to the author

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Can't wait to hear from you! ☐
Blessings, Caryl